

Ritual Fictions

The enigma made flesh in the novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun

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ABSTRACT

Tahar Ben Jelloun is a Moroccan poet and novelist who is presently active and writing in French. This thesis deals primarily with the novelistic works of the author, examining the way in which he uses rituals as a narrative device or as a theme, and how they can be seen to reflect on other salient features of his writing.

Ritual is examined as a metaphor whose incorporation into a novel can paradoxically implicate the reader and the author in the work, in the same way that ritual in life may implicate the participants in a myth. The implications of this interpretation are manifold in Ben Jelloun's work, and this thesis examines these under several broad themes, including those of meaning, enigma, freedom and the body. The thesis argues that Ben Jelloun's use of ritual reinforces his strategy of subversion and manipulation as key elements in the generative process.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun are notable for their integration of problematic social phenomena into a purely literary form. While this characteristic is not wholly unique to Ben Jelloun's writing, the manner in which the author fashions his challenging and often revolutionarily experimental narratives from the material of traditional Moroccan lives is in at least one sense extraordinary: his characters experience the social difficulties and perplexities of their lives through the metaphor of their self-conscious fictional existence. Thus, for example, the pursuit of identity in their social context is manifested in the drive for self-awareness as fictional characters, and the struggle for power in their relationships takes the form of a battle for narrative control.

In one predominant theme of Ben Jelloun's novels, the theme of ritual, is this metaphor unified, so that it in fact represents both the social existence of the characters and its self-conscious abstraction into the fictional world: the metaphor in a sense reflects itself. Through rituals the fictional characters in Ben Jelloun's novels seem to be able to manifest a degree of control over their fictional existence in much the same way that people perceive the effect of rituals in life. This appears to result from the perception of the reader that ritual is itself a metaphor (a point debated in the literature) which allows them a semblance of control over the supposed supernatural forces which shape their lives.

In Muslim society perhaps more noticeably than in the West (at least for a Western readership), ritual is a pervasive and powerful symbol of the involvement of the people in the fabric of the culture. As the object of increasing study for its own sake, rituals of all kinds have been subject to a

series of analyses which extend from the anthropological to the religious to the sociological, to those studies which depend upon the interest of rituals as distinct phenomena. While this study does not aim to provide any such analysis, the development of ritual studies is a testament to the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon, and perhaps more importantly, to its varied interpretations according to contemporary modes of thinking, which naturally find their way into our fictional discourse.

This thesis examines the implications of the self-reflecting metaphor of fictional ritual, this metaphor of a metaphor, for Ben Jelloun's work. I examine these implications by means of several key themes which reflect similar mechanisms, that is, themes which display a means by which the character gains control over his fictional existence. We see that the implications of this transcendental effect include the redefinition of the relationships between the reader, the work, the author, the narrator and the characters. We discover that the paradoxical nature of the ritual is underpinned by an all-encompassing enigmatic quality which is cultivated and elaborated in Ben Jelloun's work.

The incorporation of ritual into Ben Jelloun's fictional work is shown to involve a particularizing of the working of ritual—it is often subverted by the individual to create eccentric, fluid meanings in a way which is contrasted with the collective static nature of rituals as we are used to encountering them in life. This individualizing of ritual supports a broader theme in Ben Jelloun's work, involving the individualization of the characters themselves and their search for identity, and this search is seen as taking place by means of a rupture with an immediate authority.

The rubrics under which I have chosen to examine Ben Jelloun's novelistic works, and which rely upon the metaphors for fictional self-realization embodied in ritual which I have outlined above, include the following themes: the theme of the search for meaning, in which the attribution of signs and symbols in Ben Jelloun's text is shown to be haphazard and often deliberately misleading, pointing to the existence of an underlying mystery

whose solution is ephemeral; the theme of the enigma, which underpins this mystery; the theme of freedom, in which the characters' life struggle for freedom as they perceive it manifests itself through consciousness of the narrative structure in which they are confined, implicating the reader and the author in the narrative; the theme of the storyteller as a magical agent, or "witch", possessing a type of shaky control over the narrative which is akin to the idea of magical control over events; and the theme of the incorporation of the body into the text, in which the characters' half-guessed realization that they are part of a text manifests itself through a metaphorical synthesis of the body with the text.

Although much effort is expended by critics in attempting to define Tahar Ben Jelloun as a post-colonial writer exploiting Oriental fantasies in his Western readership, or as a socially committed "écrivain engagé", working through his novels for the advancement of disadvantaged groups in Morocco and the Maghreb, his novelistic work is iconoclastic in nature and conforms to no particular school of literature. His influences, which include Joyce and Borges as well as the Muslim mystic poets, are equally iconoclastic. For this reason I have taken a varied approach to the examination of his works, treating with equal authority fictional and non-fictional sources in the pursuit of a resolution of the problems raised by this thesis. (As mentioned in the body of the thesis, Ben Jelloun himself is not averse to mixing genres, often mystifying critics with his erroneous proclamations within ostensibly sociological studies.) I have relied upon close readings of several key works, as well as drawing on many critics of Ben Jelloun, and the ample literary-philosophical analysis which exists in relation to Ben Jelloun's writing. Of most relevance in this respect are the principles derived from Michel Foucault's works (as in the criticism of Richard Rorty), as well as those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (see William Spanos, Gregory Smith), which are frequently applied to analysis of this author.

2. THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

This chapter will examine the question of meaning, or the lack of it, inherent in rituals as they are presented by Ben Jelloun, and will try to establish a parallel with the way the question of meaning is dealt with in his texts generally. In particular, I will attempt to establish that the disintegration of meaning in rituals which is portrayed in his work reinforces a wider disintegration of meaning which is a general theme of his work.

2.1 *The Authenticity of ritual*

Ben Jelloun's work demonstrates a parallel which he perceives between authentic writing and the authentic practice of ritual. The following citation from Leonard Cohen's novel *The Favourite Game* serves to illustrate, possibly in more overt and literal terms than Ben Jelloun himself would use, the attitude towards the meaning of ritual which is apparent in his work. In this passage Cohen describes the attitude of the rabbis as they engage in an ancient Jewish ritual:

They were ignorant of the craft of devotion. They were merely devoted. They never thought how close the ceremony was to chaos. Their nobility was insecure because it rested on inheritance and not moment-to-moment creation in the face of annihilation.

... The beautiful melody soared which proclaimed that the Law was a tree of life and a path of peace. Couldn't they see how it had to be nourished? And all these men who bowed, who performed the customary motions, they were unaware that other

men had written the sacred tune, other men had developed the seemingly eternal gestures out of clumsy confusion. They took for granted what was dying in their hands. (Cohen, 127)

Cohen postulates the performance of ritual as a sort of delusion in the sense that the practitioners work under the impression that the ritual is eternal and therefore imbued with meaning, while in fact (according to Cohen) the only meaning it once held was that randomly assigned to it by the inventors of the ceremony, men like those who perform it still, and to ignore the fragile relationship between the ritual and the mortal consciousness (consciousness of mortality) of its creators is to destroy any meaning it may once have had.

In both Cohen and Ben Jelloun, the approach to fiction—spontaneous, chaotic—mirrors substantially their approach to ritual, and the confusion from which it arises.

2.2 *Fiction without meaning*

Mohamed Jouay, in his thesis *Postmodern Nomads*, uses the eponymous term to describe the characters in Ben Jelloun's work, because their "destination is either missing (hence postmodern) or simply nonexistent (hence nomads)" (Quoted in Jouay, 1994, 217). He illustrates Ben Jelloun's obsession with space and its textualization with a quotation from the work *Alberto Giacometti & Tahar Ben Jelloun*, where the author writes about "la rue d'un seul". The following is Jouay's translation:

That street is anchored in my mind like a living memory. I often talk about it, even if it is really without significance. (Jouay, 217)

Jouay is, however, concerned with the very significance which is brought out by Ben Jelloun in his use of space and he is not apparently concerned with the destruction of meaning, and even the destruction of the possibility

of meaning, which is the end result and the aim of the narration. Ben Jelloun, in the almost entirely descriptive work on Giacometti in which he presents photographic reproductions of Giacometti's sculptures alongside his own impressions of them, is not speaking figuratively when he writes that his memory of the street and thus his later recounting of that memory "is really without significance". In fact, he describes books in general as "misunderstandings".

Le livre est alors un malentendu (vivant, espère-t-il), une somme de questions où la désinvolture est un doute, où les histoires se bousculent pour lentement effacer le visage de l'auteur.
(*Poésie complète*, 498)

Ben Jelloun is concerned with delineating patterns of meaning—for example, the spatial significance particularly examined by Jouay—but ultimately in order to explode that meaning, that is, to show how it may be usurped, contradicted, made absurd, or denied. In fact, in analyzing the way in which Ben Jelloun apparently attributes meaning to places, rituals or characters in his novels, many critics take it for granted that he delineates the boundaries of meaning by first transgressing them. For instance, Shona Elizabeth Simpson interprets the substitution of the Koran for the diary of Ahmed, from which the first storyteller in *L'Enfant de sable* is ostensibly reading, as a metaphor for the archetypal nature of the story:

For instance, when the second storyteller interrupts the first, he reveals that the first was reading not from the unexpurgated notebooks of Ahmed but from the Koran, saying "it's very peculiar, he looks at the verses and reads the diary of a madman, a victim of his own illusions". Changing the words of the Koran implicates the first storyteller in heresy; moreover, the suggestion that the Koran contains Ahmed's story implies that this story is perhaps central to the Arabic people, since it is contained in their holy book. (Simpson, 328)

Here the meaning of the ritual of the *halqa*, or circle gathered around the public storyteller, is called into question. Is the storyteller trustworthy? How did the audience come to believe in his stories in the first place (his role is to entertain, after all)? Is the second storyteller correct when he says the first is reading from the Koran? Or is his accusation merely a convenient metaphor for Ahmed's plight as "victim of his own illusions"? Despite this disruption of meanings, Simpson draws a motive from Ben Jelloun's use of the device. Rather than finding in the Koran a metaphor for the Arabic people, it might be truer to say that the author uses the Koran as a symbol for writing itself, and that the attributes of writing are what he attempts to usurp in his narrative, by its confusion with oral tradition.

Looking at a more concrete example, in Mohammed Moncef Mejri's analysis of metaphors in *La Réclusion solitaire*, the critic concludes that much of Ben Jelloun's writing falls outside of the boundaries of what may be accurately understood by the reader:

... les métaphores, dans *La Réclusion solitaire*, appartiennent en définitive à trois catégories : les métaphores interprétables par rétablissement de la cohérence sémantique, les tropes ambigus, sur le sens desquels on ne peut qu'émettre les hypothèses tirées de l'imagination pour combler les vides sémantiques selon sa connaissance de la langue et éventuellement la biographie de l'auteur, et enfin, les expressions pseudo-métaphoriques ou énigmatiques dont le sens n'apparaît pas au lecteur et relèverait simplement du monde inconscient de l'écrivain. (Mejri, 81-2)

In this third category we see clearly illustrated the characteristic of Ben Jelloun's writing which interests us in this chapter. Mejri does not attempt to provide a motivation for the author's deliberate use of language which the reader may not decipher; he instead laments that "devant ce texte de Ben Jelloun, le lecteur est souvent désarçonné" (82). Rather, as we shall see, this characteristic of his writing indicates a concern for lack of mean-

ing in fiction, or for the impossibility of ascribing meaning, rather than an attempt to establish meaning.

A thematic account of this characteristic of Ben Jelloun's writing, whereby he deliberately downplays the significance of his own discourses, is provided by Agnès Hafez-Ergaut. She describes his exploration of the theme of solitude in such a way that this characteristic seems a necessary development of Ben Jelloun's consciousness as an expatriate writer, transcribing the loneliness of the immigrant worker.

Toutes [ses œuvres], en effet, ne sont-elles pas des soliloques où les héros se racontent en d'interminables monologues ? Les romans et récits de Tahar Ben Jelloun évoquent la solitude dans leur structure même : tout le monde y parle, mais toujours à soi-même ou s'adressant à un interlocuteur imaginé ou supposé. Rares sont les dialogues. (Hafez-Ergaut, 88)

Hafez-Ergaut's conclusion provides a dramatic insight into the way in which Ben Jelloun's exploration of the theme of solitude develops to assimilate language itself as a character, in the guise of a companion for his protagonist:

Personne d'autre qu'eux-mêmes n'est à leur écoute : leur propre parole leur sert donc à approvoiser la solitude. Mômo, le héros de *La réclusion solitaire*, n'exprime-t-il pas cette situation, par une pirouette syntaxique curieuse, en déclarant : « Je 'seule' avec mes mots » ? (89)

In Hafez-Ergaut's analysis, Mômo is himself a character made up of his own words—a contention underlined by the pun in his name. But this interpretation only hints at a more far-reaching implication within Ben Jelloun's work: that words themselves behave as characters in the novels. It may be useful to bear this in mind when we consider the great diversity we find in the personality of language in Ben Jelloun's writing. Many baffling aspects

of his writing may be explained if we consider that words may take on the mantle of hero, clown, whore, lover and so on in his work. To the extent that language is a theme of Ben Jelloun's work (recall the spontaneously writing typewriter in *L'Homme rompu* (184)), language is certainly given the status and freedoms of any other character in the work.

In Ben Jelloun's depiction of Tangier in *Harrouda* we see the genesis of an ambivalence in the author's treatment of language as a subject. Charles Bonn describes how the city is depicted as hiding itself behind a scarf, lying to the people. In his critique, the word ("le verbe") is the key to the city's attraction and the influence which she displays over her subjects:

Les montagnards y sont attirés par les séductions de la reine bleue d'Andalousie, car la ville est femme, qu'ouvre le verbe aux désirs de la terre ou du sable. Cependant cette ouverture offerte est piège *langagier*. Semblable à l'oiseau-conteur de la tradition populaire, la reine bleue d'Andalousie y rend esclaves tous ceux à qui elle raconte son histoire. (Bonn, 15)

Bonn sees Tangier, as depicted by Ben Jelloun, as laying a verbal trap for those who come there from outside. They become ensnared by the story they come to hear from her. The word is the key to the story, but this key has already been usurped—the nature of the language is transformed while hiding its transformation.

Le verbe y est donc combustion de la terre, flamme qui fascine et qui anéantit. Tanger est « la ville ouverte » où « l'amour et la terre (sont) liés dans la trahison du verbe qui monte, monte et se fait nuage ». ... Le nuage ultime est celui du kif. Le verbe est pris à son propre piège. Il n'a guère plus de réalité que la transparente ville-femme qu'il suggérerait. (15)

Thus meanings in Ben Jelloun should be read as so many deceptions and masks. It is a narrative where the word is turned against itself and betrays

only hints of its true character. The image of hashish smoke as the final cloud, or level of the word, indicates forgetting and veiling of meanings also, and a kind of self-delusion. Bonn also writes: “Le kif est l’écriture dernière” (14).

John D. Erickson’s interpretation of *L’Enfant de sable* postulates the outlining of a strategy in the work for the liberation of the Muslim woman, and ultimately finds a type of subversion of the negativism of her present social status. In doing so, his terminology reflects the idea of the permeation of non-meaning in Ben Jelloun’s work.

L’Enfant de sable pose la question de savoir quelle stratégie pourrait permettre à la femme arabe d’échapper aux valeurs déterminantes de la doctrine masculine de l’Islam, tout en évitant le piège d’un simple renversement de la relation binaire homme-femme par laquelle la femme ne s’arrogerait que le discours de l’homme, situation qui laisserait le système idéologique intact. ... En refusant les structures autoritaires mâles, Zahra exclut les principes arbitraires d’où ces structures puisent leur pouvoir. Ces principes viennent d’un discours de « vérité » ... ce discours produit les conditions selon lesquelles tout énoncé sera jugé négativement ou positivement par rapport à une valeur du « vrai » ... L’acte d’exclusion de Zahra, son retour à soi, est en fait la négation de la négation. (Erickson, 93)

The final sentence of this quotation illustrates to what extent the perception of non-meaning in Ben Jelloun’s writing is prone to come to the surface in criticism of his work. The author is seen to be not only refuting the system with which he is confronted, but refuting it in such a way that it underlines that system’s basic negativity. Moreover his fundamental motivation is seen as undermining the “système idéologique” which itself engenders this conflict.

Erickson most importantly points out that Ben Jelloun’s *modus operandi* is to actually deny the validity of any “discours de vérité”. The implica-

tion of the denial of the possibility of, to paraphrase Erickson, judging any utterance as true or untrue, is to place imagination, and therefore fiction, in a position of moral superiority. This position is based entirely upon the ability to provide freedom, to allow the creation of new meanings and the survival of new systems of thought. The implication of "negation of negation" is an openness to novelty, to the marginalized, and an invitation to the voiceless to speak.

2.3 Definition through transgression

Not only can Ben Jelloun be shown to explode or disintegrate meaning in his work, but paradoxically his writing uses that very disintegration of meaning as a tool to delineate the meanings which he subsequently explodes. For instance, the character of Ahmed in *L'Enfant de sable* delineates exactly what it means to be a woman in Muslim society precisely because she lives as a man instead. The malleability of what it means to a person to be a woman demonstrates the actual emptiness of this perceived meaning.

Rituals such as the trips with her mother to the public baths rely upon the inherent significance of this rite of passage for a young boy, while in the same instant transgressing that meaning. Because of her self-image as separate from her sisters and in some sense a boy, Ahmed experiences this episode with a similar mixture of fascination and revulsion that we expect a real boy would. The storyteller says of the ritual: "Nous en sommes tous sortis indemnes. . . , du moins apparemment", and interprets the child's experience similarly: "Pour Ahmed ce ne fut pas un traumatisme, mais une découverte étrange et amère" (*L'Enfant de sable*, 32). We are therefore left in a vacuum of meanings: the inversion of the subject's effective gender does not reverse the meaning of the ritual, as we expect it would. The new meanings of the ritual are, on the contrary, haphazard and random. In Ahmed's own description of this ritual, transmitted by the storyteller via his "diary", meaning itself, in fact, is the subject:

Elles parlaient toutes en même temps. Qu'importe ce qu'elles disaient, mais elles parlaient. . . . Les mots et phrases fusaient de partout et, comme la pièce était fermée et sombre, ce qu'elles disaient était comme retenu par la vapeur et restait suspendu au-dessus de leurs têtes. Je voyais des mots monter lentement et cogner contre le plafond humide. (33)

Ahmed experiences this episode as a seminal introduction to language. But her growing awareness of the correspondence of words and meanings emphasizes the equivocal nature of this correspondence. Words and sentences may make sense or not, some are “lighter” than others, some usually whispered and at other times shouted in anger (34–5).

Je jonglais avec les mots et ça donnait parfois des phrases tombées sur la tête, du genre : “la nuit le soleil sur le dos dans un couloir où le pouce de l’homme mon homme dans la porte du ciel le rire. . .”, puis soudain une phrase sensée : “l’eau est brûlante. . . , donne-moi un peu de ton eau froide. . .”. (34–5)

Ahmed’s redefinition of language according to her own scheme—as-signing it invented properties and asserting tactile control over units such as words, reflects the eccentricity of her own story and her enthusiasm with regard to her difference. She declares with relief on contemplating the women’s lives whose details she overhears at the baths: “J’étais secrètement content de ne pas faire partie de cet univers si limité” (34).

Although the social rules—which Ahmed’s participation in this episode secretly transgresses—are solidified, the new meanings which his presence at the hammam gives to those rules show them up to be essentially random. The already-established rules are what Cohen calls customs of “inheritance”; Ahmed’s reaction to the situation, together with the meaning we are called upon to ascribe to it, are Cohen’s “moment-to-moment creation”.

An analogous characteristic of Ben Jelloun's work is the way in which narrative voices transgress the boundaries of other voices in his novels. Erickson describes this in terms of the author's insistence on an authentic female narrative, an idea which he traces back to the *Thousand and One Nights*, and particularly Borges's reading of the implications of this truly seminal work.

Ben Jelloun suggère une stratégie pour la femme arabe, stratégie qui joue un rôle important dans son récit : le repli du récit sur lui-même, de manière que l'externe devienne interne, le dehors le dedans. Dans l'intertexte des *Mille et une nuits* le récit ... finit quand l'histoire enchassée de Schéhérazade s'en-chasse en elle-même. Comme Borges le remarque,

En esa noche, el rey oye de boca de la reina su propia historia. Oye el principio de la historia, que abarca a todas las demás, y también—de monstruoso modo—, a si misma. ¿Intuye claramente el lector la vasta posibilidad de esa interpolación, el curiosa peligro? Que la reina persista y el inmóvil rey oirá para siempre la trunca historia de *Las Mil y Una Noches*, ahora infinita y circular ...

[On that night, the king hears from the queen his own story. He hears the beginning of the story, which comprises all the others and also—monstrously—itself. Does the reader clearly grasp the vast possibilities of this interpolation, the curious danger? That the queen may persist and the motionless king hear forever the truncated story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, now infinite and circular. ...]

(Translation Borges (1970g), 230)

Ben Jelloun pousse aussi loin que possible ce procédé de clôture

narrative—qui correspond à l'espace de la clôture féminine— ...
(Erickson, 194–5)

Erickson's use of Borges's commentary is particularly appropriate since it is indeed this interpretation which Ben Jelloun is likely to draw upon when he models his narrative in the way Erickson describes. There is a Freudian aspect to his interpretation which suggests that the folding of the narrative which he characterizes here reflects a symbolic setting off of masculine and feminine differences, on both the physically sexual, as well as the psychic levels. This aspect is present in the Borges work also, and indeed the original *Thousand and One Nights* concludes with the King's terrorizing of his city, by taking a new lover every night and killing her the next morning, finally transformed into marital bliss thanks to the story-telling skill of Scheherazade. In the structure, as well as the theme, of the tale can be seen a parable of the victory of "female" closure—an eternal circle which ends and begins again every night—over male linear progression. What Borges finds so terrifying is the impossibility of each story being contained in itself, a parable of birth which Scheherazade, as a woman, would perhaps not find so difficult to bear.

Erickson's conclusion of the ramifications for the narrative structure continue this development in narrative structure:

... les niveaux narratifs se mêlent à un tel degré
que les barrières qui séparent les personnages et les
conteurs/raconteurs sont battues en brèche et deviennent
traversables, fondues, confondues, si bien que les narra-
teurs/personnages passent librement d'un niveau à un autre ...
(295)

As can be seen from this reading, Ben Jelloun explores the implications for his narrative structures of the thematic melding of masculine and feminine symbolologies. Erickson's interpretation also suggests an erotic element, whereby the sexual melding of bodies, the crossing of barriers between the

ego and the object of desire, reflect the breaking of barriers between narrator and character. This is particularly well illustrated in the episode in *La Nuit sacrée* involving Zahra and the Consul in the brothel (see page 170). As I discuss elsewhere, in this adventure Zahra takes control of her story to achieve her desires, creating a convenient fiction for the sake of both participants, and becoming for a moment the narrator—a position she is at that stage unprepared for.

2.4 Subversion of ritual exposes meaninglessness

The episode of the mock circumcision in *L'Enfant de sable* replaces the ancient ritual of male circumcision with an individual, improvised charade, playing on the expectation of a new meaning to be derived from the gender substitution. This individualized ritual attracts the scorn of the storyteller-narrator, whose commentary at this point in the story is mocking. He decries the cynicism and desperation of the father who plots to continue his deception of his relatives and neighbours:

Comment couper un prépuce imaginaire? Comment ne pas fêter avec faste le passage à l'âge d'homme de cette enfant? Ô mes amis, il est des folies que même le diable ignore! ... Figurez-vous qu'il a présenté au coiffeur-circonciseur son fils, les jambes écartées, et que quelque chose a été effectivement coupé, que le sang a coulé, éclaboussant les cuisses de l'enfant et le visage du coiffeur. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 31–2)

The family's naïveté and cowardice are also mocked by the narrator. Among those present hardly anyone notices the father's thumb, subsequently bandaged after being deliberately cut to provide the expected spurt of blood during the ceremony, and nobody dares express their suspicions.

Rares furent ceux qui remarquèrent que le père avait un pansement autour de l'index de la main droite. Il le cachait bien. Et

personne ne pensait une seconde que le sang versé était celui du doigt! ...

Et qui dans cette famille se sentait de taille à l'affronter? Pas même ses deux frères. D'ailleurs, quels que fussent leurs soupçons ils ne se risquèrent à aucune plaisanterie douteuse ni sous-entendue quant au sexe de l'enfant. (32)

Ahmed derives no actual sense of male identity from this ritual; on the contrary, she draws a rather obfuscatory connection of the image of the circumcision with the arrival of her first period, describing her unexpected bleeding as a "résistance du corps au nom; éclaboussure d'une circoncision tardive" (46). Lisa Lowe explains this transformation as a parody of Freudian fetishism:

In discovering menstrual blood on her sheets, Ahmed disavows its significance, interpreting the blood as a delayed sign of circumcision rather than as the commencement of female fertility. In this scene Ahmed rewrites the traditional Freudian concept of "disavowal": Freud described disavowal as the operation in which the child believes that he or she *does* see a penis in the mother's genitals, a fantasy which leads to fetishism or the simultaneous denial and acknowledgement of female castration. (Lowe, 55)

Whether Ahmed in her diary really records a form of psychological "disavowal", or whether she is demonstrating her own artistic right of interpretation (this part of the narrative is conveyed through her supposed "diary"), the meanings presented to the reader are radically skewed from what is to be expected. As Lowe points out, the essential point is that Ahmed, self-consciously or not, disavows the *significance* of her body's physically manifesting signs. Perhaps by coincidence, at the same time even the possibility of an inferred significance from a Freudian viewpoint is undermined and clouded by eccentricity. Lowe continues:

In a parody of the structure of fetishism, Ahmed's interpretation substitutes the explanation of delayed circumcision for the fact of menstruation, simultaneously registering two contrary beliefs—it insists on the blood as a sign of masculinity at the same time that it recognizes blood as a possible trace of femininity that needs to be displaced ... (55)

What Lowe describes here as the simultaneous registering of contrary beliefs is roughly analogous to my assertion of an actual disintegration of meaning in the work with regard to the gender issues raised by this episode. Although from a psychological point of view it may be more correct to speak of the possible coexistence of opposing views within a psyche, on the fictional level at least I read Ben Jelloun's intentions here as an attempt to both undermine and explode expectations of meaning in the reader, thus opening up the possibilities for meaning to the imagination and actually defining *meaning* as arbitrary and subject to such whims. The fact that this episode appears to stand on its head the very notion of fetishism—a notion which itself embodies the perverse as well as psychic confusion with regard to "female castration"—supports this interpretation.

The character Ahmed, on the other hand, does not seem later to be confused (as we might expect her to be) by the apparent inappropriateness of the circumcision ritual. Forced by circumstances created by the rather unique designs of her father to transgress ritual boundaries, even to the point of participating in the sacrilegious act of faking the ritual of male circumcision, she limits herself to oblique commentaries such as the circumcision analogy cited above, ascribing little meaning to her own involvement in these rites. Her role as a transgressor of ritual boundaries seems to be insignificant, and she ascribes no more meaning to the rite than a boy would.

In this way Ben Jelloun calls into question the existence of any absolute significance for these rituals, as well as for the social constructs in which they are embodied. Returning to Lowe's analysis once more, we see that

she attributes this ambivalence to what she sees as an analogy between the character Ahmed and historic Morocco, with its problematic self-identity.

In the novel's allegory, which features colonialism, nativism, and nomadism in the register of sexuality, the *topos* of forced transvestism corresponds to the cultural *topos* of French colonial domination of Morocco, while the possibility of realizing an "authentic" female identity, which preoccupies a number of the narrators, corresponds to an idealized return to precolonial nativism. In this sense the protagonist's nomadic vacillation between the positions of male identity, male-as-female and female-as-male, suggests an analogous irresolution for the struggles of the Moroccan nation... (56)

Ben Jelloun supports this analogy in an interview with Philippe Gaillard. On the subject of the same character Zahra in *La Nuit sacrée*, he says:

... je crois que ce que j'ai voulu montrer, c'est le processus d'une émancipation. Les épreuves que subit Zahra pourrait aussi bien être celles d'un peuple en lutte pour sa libération. (Gaillard, 44)

Within this extremely convincing argument for an historical post-colonial reading of *L'Enfant de sable*, we nevertheless find that Ben Jelloun's alleged purpose is to depict an "irresolution" of Morocco's troubles, and therefore of the meanings raised by the analogy. Lowe goes on to emphasize this by noting that...

... the protagonist's nomadic cross-dressing suggests a relationship to sexuality in which there are no stable, essentialized gender sites, in which the undetermined wandering from identity to identity, desire to desire, is a strategy for resisting the fixed formations of either fixed masculine or feminine subjectivities... (57)

In other words, the essential aspect of the novel's meaning, and the key to its intrigue—the deliberate distortion of gender roles first by Ahmed's father and later by her as she attempts to compensate for the distortion and reappropriate her sexuality for herself—is framed with a view to undermining that meaning and discrediting the assumptions which underpin it.

2.5 Arbitrariness in ritual

Some examples from anthropological and other sources serve to shed light on the logic behind Ben Jelloun's apparent scheme with respect to meaning in rituals. In relation to circumcision in Morocco at least one writer, Vincent Crapanzano (see Fried and Fried, 1980, 69), has ridiculed attempts to establish meanings for it. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, ritualization as it applies to the social body relies upon "a misrecognition of the source and arbitrariness" of the schemes which structure the social environment (Bell, 1992, 206).

Günter Grass, in his novel *The Rat*, comments on this tendency towards arbitrary social divergence by ascribing the same random attribution of meaning to rats. In his novel, a matriarch rat is recounting the history of her race to the last surviving human after a nuclear holocaust:

We're getting religion. No sooner has the human race perished than we start looking behind things, seeking for meaning, fashioning images. All this would be bearable if not understandable if it were one unifying faith that was making us rats pious. But far from it, just like humans, we go in for deviations. Outward indications mark trends and creeds. (Grass, 217)

Ironically, the she-rat has painted a picture of rat superiority over humans up until this point, engineering the demise of humankind just as its talent for rapacious exploitation threatened to destroy what life still remained on the planet. Only after the mass of humanity has perished do

the rats take up their bad habits, fostering self-delusion and arbitrary social divisions, forming political parties and so on. On this basis, Grass seems to think of the formation of religion as an arbitrary process much as Cohen does, in which we can see the beginnings of the tendency embodied in ritual to “misrecognize” its “arbitrariness”. The implication that even rats behave this way given the opportunity is obviously devaluing of human efforts in this regard—efforts so often themselves lauded as features of the “civilized man”. Robbins’ lament over “the plexus of communal rites that presently divides peoples into unwieldy, agitating and competing groups” (see page 41) is borne out here also.

But the other implication of the rat analogy, which comes about because of the sequence of human extinction followed by rat sectarianism, is that this creation of varied religious rituals and creeds is merely a necessary function of a collective intelligence: to fill up the available meanings with corresponding signs. The rats in Grass’s novel have no need to perform this function when the humans had already managed it so well and with such amazing diversity. But after the humans’ demise the burden fell on them: the space of possible (often mutually exclusive) meanings had to be filled. While Robbins imagines in Utopian fashion that this process will individualize further with the demise of institutionalized ritual, Ben Jelloun sees the process constantly turning in on itself, with new meanings created on top of and in response to the old ones.

2.6 *The Expatriate and postmodernism*

Agnès Hafez-Ergaut notes that even in Ben Jelloun’s very early work *La Réclusion solitaire* (1973), a certain unreality was apparent in his depictions of such concrete concepts as the earth, for example. Hafez-Ergaut connects this with Ben Jelloun’s concern for the plight of his expatriate countrymen in France at the time, which was then the subject of the greater part of his work:

Tahar Ben Jelloun est un poète qui nous instruit sur l'infortune de son peuple. C'est pourquoi sa terre ressemble plus à une projection de l'esprit qu'à une réalité. Sa terre n'a pas de corps : elle se fait sable et se répand dans une malle ; elle ressemble à une image peinte, au détour du souvenir, coincée entre les frustrations et la réalité ; elle devient abstraction. (Hafez-Ergaut, 77)

Hafez-Ergaut's analysis is fairly didactic in its attribution of Ben Jelloun's motives, but it nevertheless underlines the way that separation from a writer's roots colours their depiction of fundamental symbolisms. Of course, that his earth *appears* to be a "projection de l'esprit" merely implies that the author chooses to display its "fictional essence" (see footnote page 153), that the effort of the expatriate to *imagine* his lost land must itself be conveyed in the work.

The dissipation of meaning in fiction—the apparent divorce from any reference point—is an acknowledged characteristic of expatriate writers, as Jouay demonstrates in this quote from Salman Rushdie:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Jouay, 100)

Although Jouay uses this citation as a departure point for an examination of the "itinerary" of Ben Jelloun's texts away from a centre and back towards it, it is more easily justifiable to perceive in Rushdie's quote an admission

of a kind of self-delusion and an acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of his creations—and this acknowledgement necessarily for Rushdie feeds further creation. In this way the author writes with a knowledge of the gulf between his writing and what he actually perceives or experiences. He finishes, in fact, not by recreating lost meaning, but by writing about non-meaning—his consciousness of the irrevocable loss of meaning necessarily colours his writing with that awareness.

Even Ben Jelloun's particular way of setting off the various narrators in *L'Enfant de sable* testifies to the exploration of this cultivated arbitrariness in his work. John D. Erickson refers to Derrida's gloss on Blanchot's theory of narrative/narrator's voice to outline this distinction:

Chacun—la femme cachée et l'auteur nord-africain, comme narratrice/narrateur virtuel(le)—parle au moyen d'« une voix neutre qui dit l'œuvre à partir de ce lieu sans lieu où l'œuvre se tait » [Blanchot] : voix silencieuse, donc [glose Derrida], retirée en son "aphonie". Cette "aphonie la distingue de la "voix narratrice", celle que la critique littéraire, la poétique ou la narratologie s'emploient à situer dans le système du récit, du roman, de la narration. La voix narratrice revient à un sujet qui raconte quelque chose, se souvenant d'un événement ou d'une séquence historique, sachant qui il est, où il est, et de quoi il parle ». ... (Erickson, 289)

Thus the multiple narrators are an authority who speak for the silent voice of the protagonist, a rebel and a fugitive for much of the novel, as well as equally for the silent author, hiding behind the illusion of fiction. But Ben Jelloun's use of the narrators usurps this arrangement, so that they begin to actually lose their authority—their discourse shows itself to be based on arbitrary conventions, and therefore reveals conceit:

Ces voix narratrices communiquent au monde extradiégétique des lecteurs et des critiques un savoir arbitraire conçu à partir

d'un événement, d'une séquence historique, d'une identité, d'un lieu et d'un temps précis. Ces voix ... articulent des notions qui répondent à des idées, des concepts, des systèmes préconçus ... Pareillement, la voix des raconteurs/raconteuses et du narrateur omniscient *semblent* « dire » des choses d'une façon indiscutable ... (289)

Ben Jelloun's novel undermines the meanings upon which the narrative voice relies by an attack which Erickson depicts as part of the "outlaw" nature of the work:

Pourtant, cette stabilité apparente commence à se dissoudre car rien ne se conforme à la loi dans ce récit hors-la-loi. Il résiste à être raconté d'une manière cohérente, définitive, et le silence du récit atone de Zahra arrive à se répercuter plus fort que le récit vocalisé (les voix narratrices) d'Ahmed et des conteurs/euses. (290)

This resistance to the very possibility of coherence is nothing less than an anarchistic embrace of non-meaning, manifested (or disguised) in the form of arbitrary meanings, in the face of the repressive, rigid structures of meaning which characterize both the society which is depicted in the work and the literary tradition in which the novel inserts itself. Coherence is not only rejected in a thematic struggle but permeates through his work, underlining the difficulty of defining Ben Jelloun's novels according to the French literary tradition. Ben Jelloun, despite his identification as a post-colonial writer from the Maghreb, is held by many critics to operate in a field somewhat removed from the vicissitudes of French literary fashion—and this embrace of the chaotic and unpredictable in his writing seems to be the main reason for this impression. In an interview in *Jeune Afrique*, Philippe Gaillard is able to state confidently:

Le choix des mots est soigné, mais le romancier s'interdit, visiblement, toute recherche d'écriture pour l'écriture. Il est, en

somme, comme à l'abri des modes de la littérature française. Les jeux littéraires gratuits sont aux antipodes de son travail d'écrivain. (Gaillard, 45)

While Gaillard's judgement seems to be based on admiration for the author and the awareness of his opinions concerning such literary forms as the *nouveau roman*, this does not seem sufficient to explain this reaction from the public. Ben Jelloun's well-known abhorrence of prejudice seems to translate into a corpus which consciously defies labelling, and even, to a marked extent, interpretation.

But just how far will Ben Jelloun go in order to undermine received meanings in his works? It seems that Ben Jelloun has even used the cloak of non-fiction to elaborate meanings which seem closer to deceptions for some critics. In *La Plus haute des solitudes*, for example, Hafez-Ergaut perceives an exasperating untruth in the claim that in Arabic the male genitals are identified linguistically with the spirit:

Au sujet de l'impuissance, il s'agit de relever dans ce même texte une affirmation qui, pour illustrer le propos avec brio, n'en est pas moins erronée : « Le sexe (la verge, les testicules) se dit en arabe 'souffle' (nafss), 'âme' (rouh), 'vie' ». ... Or aucune étude lexicale ... vient corroborer cette idée. ... Bien sûr, on peut arguer que ... l'activité virile se trouve ... liée à la vie. Il n'en demeure pas moins que cette affirmation implique une connotation inexistante dans le langage courant ... (Hafez-Ergaut, 82-3)

Not only does Ben Jelloun's flagrant manipulation of the non-Arabic-speaking reader contravene the conventions of non-fiction writing (*La Plus haute des solitudes* is ostensibly a collection of patient interviews from his social psychiatry practise), but the passage in question also contains elements of mild sacrilegious parody, since the two Arabic terms may have the connotation of the life-giving breath of God. The association of these

terms with the male genitals is quite eccentric, however, and takes on the character of an in-joke, especially when we consider how the episode of the suicide-by-funeral in *La Nuit de l'erreur* recalls this idea (see page 188), as the dying man's erection satirically symbolizes the spirit leaving the body.

While Hafez-Ergaz draws no firm conclusions concerning Ben Jelloun's intentions in this regard, her use of the term "connotation inexistante" perfectly characterizes the author's scheme when approaching the question of meanings and the relation of signs to them. Without diverging into surrealism, Ben Jelloun gives in to no restraint or convention in his exploration of meanings.

A more profound and far-reaching analysis of Ben Jelloun's use of sexual blasphemy is made by Charles Bonn, who determines that, right from his first novel *Harrouda*, the author makes a strong parallel between writing and ejaculation:

Mais l'agression la plus violente contre la transparence du discours répressif se fait par le contre-discours du sexe, et le blasphème quotidien. ... dès cette première page de l'écriture est elle-même éjaculation : « Sur l'effigie de ce sexe nous éjaculons des mots ». Or, ce sexe n'est-il pas d'abord Harrouda, entre les cuisses de qui les enfants viennent se réfugier, et naît la parole qu'est le roman ?

Cette parole-éjaculation s'attaque en priorité au discours coranique, discours de la séparation-castration : n'est-ce pas sur une planche coranique que le circonciseur a collé les petits sexes qu'il collectionne ? (Bonn, 23)

In this scenario the author's discourse, represented by the city's children and their relationship to its anti-heroine Harrouda, is characterized as essentially vital, while the discourse of the city, and of its religion, is deathly and depriving of the life-force. The author's use of a discourse which essentially subverts its own world-view—the silent are given a voice while the voice of the powerful becomes transparent—has powerful ramifications. The paral-

lel drawn between ejaculation and the word has the effect of drawing the concepts of body and text together, while at the same time lending to the idea of the word a spontaneous, scandalous nature inextricably linked with eroticism and imagination.

In elaborating this opposition of opacity and transparency, Bonn sees many interplays of the body and the text (e.g. *sang* and *mensonges* (24)), notably with regard to Ben Jelloun's portrayal of parricide:

Le meurtre du père chez Benjelloun ne relève donc pas comme chez Boudjedra du « roman familial », au sens strictement freudien du terme. Il est au contraire conflit de langages, révolte de l'opacité et de la couleur contre la fausse transparence d'un discours répressif, ce même discours qui instituait Fass sur la séparation du « pur » et de l'« impur ». Révolte du corps contre le verbe qui l'insulte. (24)

Ben Jelloun's construction of a language which owes nothing to this "discours répressif" necessarily involves the breaking down of meanings and concepts, the use of outrage and scandal to play on received meanings and turn them on themselves. He must confront the repressive discourse with a liberating but essentially violently confrontational discourse of his own. But the crucial character of this confrontation is the setting off of the basically innocent, though scandalous, nature of the novelist's discourse—identified as it is with the unaffected child's fantasy world—against the prurient, dominating discourse of the city—identified with the repressive adult world. Bonn notes the provocation of the opening line of *Harrouda*:

« Voir un sexe fut la préoccupation de notre enfance » est la première phrase du livre, qui se veut par ailleurs plaie, blessure, violence. (9)

But the strange juxtaposition of childlike brashness and simplicity with considered provocation already provides a foil to the restrictions of the "civi-

lized" language of the urban society, revealing it as hypocritical and duplicitous by the mere challenge in the phrase.

The theme of non-meaning draws upon the fundamental concerns of postmodernist writing in terms of the necessity for ironic self-awareness of the limitations of language in representing this very idea. Spanos invokes Kierkegaard's elaboration of the concept of irony in this regard:

In Kierkegaard's useful term, postmodern fiction and poetry are a literature of "mastered irony", an irony that, unlike the balanced and resolving irony of modernism, refuses to fulfil the expectation of closure or to provide the distancing certainty the literary tradition from the Greeks ... has inscribed in the collective consciousness of Western readers. In thus destroying (de-structuring) traditional forms, postmodern writing, far from generating aesthetic distance ... assigns readers to their immediate (not "proper") selves ... (Spanos, 216-7)

Ben Jelloun's evocation of non-meaning draws upon this recent tradition of mastered irony in order to "refuse to fulfil the expectation of closure" that its readers bring to it as far as meaning itself is concerned. That is, their search for that which the book is trying to convey is met with the implication that, in effect, the medium is unreliable—that the concept of meaning itself is at stake and that only clues which hint that some signs have no meaning can partly convey this. This is illustrated by the way in which the works talk enigmatically about loss, emptiness, and the search for something unknown.

In Jouay's attempt to establish a multiplicity of definitions from Ben Jelloun's treatment of place, culture, identity etc., he often touches on the possibility of an implied non-meaning as the ultimate step in the progression away from a unique, consistent certainty.

It is curious to note that it is now space itself, not the scribe, which effects the displacement, or maybe both of them, or, even

better, maybe none of them goes anywhere. What is certain, however, is that nothing is fixed. (Jouay, 139–40)

This passage, itself contradictory (“none of them goes anywhere ... nothing is fixed”), refers to the narrator’s overt confusion of the cities of Tangier, Medina and Fez in *L’Écrivain public*. It is possible to interpret the narrator’s concern with this disorientation as an attempt to show that the meanings people routinely associate with places are erroneous. Beyond merely attempting to establish movement as a characteristic of all things, even of such things as fixed geographical locations, Ben Jelloun is actually attempting to use this logical absurdity to deconstruct absolutely the meanings which are associated with places—as Jouay’s analysis in this example shows—and also with characters and with the concept of personality *per se*.

The explosion of meaning this represents also reflects Ben Jelloun’s attitude to representation in literature. The following is a reported quotation from a meeting with students at the Université Stendhal:

... le réalisme en littérature est absolument impossible, parce que la réalité est tellement riche, foisonnante, inattendue et traversée par tellement de choses mystérieuses et énigmatiques, que prétendre redonner en littérature cette réalité est vraiment prétentieux. (Van Poucke)

Not only does this quotation show the motivation behind an attempt to destroy the notion of realism in literature, this motivation—a recognition of the mysterious and enigmatic nature of reality—provides the ingredients with which he explores the theme of the impossibility of realism in his work. The exploration in his work of what appears as enigmatic and mysterious in real life emphasizes the impossibility of literature adequately to embody life.

But Ben Jelloun’s attitude to the relationship between reality and literature is still essentially positivist, in that he sees his writing as a reaction

to the challenge of the extremes of reality. In *La Rue pour un seul* he approaches the question from what at first sounds like an opposing point of view:

J'écris pour capter l'extrême limite du réel. Je ne peux pas faire autrement, car j'appartiens à un pays où la terre est enceinte d'histoires, où l'imagination du peuple est si riche, imprévisible, fantastique, et qu'il suffit pour l'écrire de tendre l'oreille humblement et de savoir que le réalisme est impossible. Tout est fugitif. Rien ne s'inscrit définitivement sur le marbre de l'oubli. Tout est à réinventer parce que « chaque chose est incroyablement nouvelle ». (*La Rue pour un seul*, 33)

Ben Jelloun's initial declared intention here, "capter l'extrême limite du réel", could be interpreted as the starting point for a kind of literary realism. But the reality he seeks to capture is so at odds with a logical, resolving and analytical reality that it is in fact more what we are used to describing as a physics of the world of literature than of the world of experience. It is ostensibly the physical earth itself which is "enceinte d'histoires". The boundaries between people and land are so tenuous that in this way the stories of the people are seen to colour the actual landscape. In this scheme meanings are much closer to that which inspires or produces those meanings, and conversely reality is bound to the ephemeral nature of people's lives and the stories which come out of them.

Other critics have perceived the same persistent avoidance of meaning in Ben Jelloun's work. Françoise Gaudin, for example, comes to the following conclusion after a thematic analysis of sexual perversions to be found in Ben Jelloun's work, masturbation and voyeurism in particular. Appropriately, she finds that the prevalence of these "unhealthy" expressions of sexuality in his writing points towards the (apparently consciously) illusory and pointless nature of the novels themselves:

La polysémie masque les significations et les multiplie. Mais le syllogisme reconduit inévitablement dans les contrées de la mémoire, à la langue du corps, au voile de l'onanisme ... Les romans valent pour ce qu'ils se donnent : des leures. « L'inaccessible » n'est pas de se coucher tout nu dans les pages d'un cahier, ou plutôt tout indicible qu'il est, il n'est bien que cela. Et ascèse, rituel, délivrance, mutation, violence extrême et surpême, pêtent comme ces ballons qu'on vend sur les foires, ce sont des illusions qui donnent le change, moins « vertu » que tricherie. (Gaudin, 144)

Gaudin's summary is close to a lament of the meaninglessness which she sees Ben Jelloun conveying in his novels:

Le « Je » dans son jeu, s'y regarde sans s'y voir. Habitant les images, les figures et les tropes, il exploite des pôles d'identifications, se donnant en spectacle ou créant des personnages qui répondent à ses équations. Les textes ne disent rien, encore moins l'assujettissement du sujet à un objet qui lui est propre. Ce sont effectivement des histoires. . .

« où rien n'arrive, où rien ne commence et où tout finit
dans la béatitude et la paix des sables. » (144)

But it can be argued that there is opening in Ben Jelloun's work, and even though the lack of closure gives the impression of not saying anything, the opening nevertheless suggests the beginning, the germ of a voice. In Ahmed Jabri's deconstructive study, he asserts that even possible closures in his work lead to more openings:

L'œuvre de Ben Jelloun, du moins depuis *Moha le fou Moha le sage* et jusqu'à *La Nuit sacrée*, se donne à ce jeu déconstructif et se soumet volontiers à une révolution (au sens sidéral du terme) sans connaître vraiment "une clôture". Au cas où cette

dernière existe, elle est immédiatement exposée comme une possible ouverture à un discours autre. Ainsi tous les concepts possibles existant dans les textes de B.J., sont sujets à une analyse, à une lecture et à une vision déconstructive et par conséquent à “*un re-marquage du motif transcendantal*”, comme le soulignait F. Laruelle. (Jabri, 132)

That Ben Jelloun's purpose is transcendental in nature seems a grand claim, but the constant undermining of meaning which we have seen forces the reader constantly to reexamine his relationship to the text, thereby transcending the barriers between the world of the work and his own world. Ben Jelloun's scheme is indeed to rewrite the structure by which this transcendence may be accomplished, and in a sense the manipulation of meaning is a way of un-writing it first.

2.7 Mystification

Another interpretation of Ben Jelloun's treatment of meaning can be made by examining the mystical aspect of reality which he touches on in the quotation from Van Poucke (page 29). A major theme of the majority of Ben Jelloun's works is the search, or quest. These quests are often in pursuit of that which is mysterious or “magical”. Ben Jelloun can be seen to be concerned with the hierarchy of understanding built up by the search for the mystical and how power is consequently imbued in objects and people through the identification of this magical property. His characters are usually seen to err in their search for that which they identify as mysterious or magical, much in the same manner that the rats described in Grass's novel go astray by “getting religion” (see page 20). They thereby perpetuate the familiar human tendency to subordinate oneself to a power one does not understand. Ben Jelloun's work shows a concern for the structural power of that which is identified as mysterious, magical or fantastic.

To this end Ben Jelloun also imitates the genres which support this

power, using them to his own ends. Nelly Lindenlauf describes how, in the novel *Les Yeux baissés*, his reversal of expectations concerning the classic fable of the dried-up spring (his spring wells up instead of drying up, and the “treasure” is the water, rather than gold which spoils the water) contributes to his exposure of the mystification principle to his readers:

Détromper les esprits naïfs, guérir les imaginations des superstitions et des clichés malsains qui les ligotent, afin que les hommes s'ouvrent à l'action et que les terres déshéritées renaissent à la vie, telle semble bien être la leçon sur laquelle débouche la démythification du conte. Tel semble bien être l'effort de l'écrivain dans son œuvre romanesque. (Lindenlauf, 50)

Although I would not go as far as Lindenlauf in attributing such straightforward and beneficent motives to Ben Jelloun's work, she is nevertheless largely correct in her analysis of the voluntary deception which fables work on a collective consciousness. I would submit, however, that Ben Jelloun's appropriation of the form and symbols of popular folklore merely attempts a reorganization of values within the same mystical framework. As a creator and teller of stories himself, he does not appear to show any signs of lack of faith in the power of stories over people's self-conception.

As I discuss in the chapter dealing with enigma (Chapter 5), Ben Jelloun characteristically offers his readers false hope in their search for meaning in his narratives, just as his characters are deceived and deceive themselves, entangling themselves in a web of lies built on lies, false assumptions and suspicion, and setting out to decipher labyrinths which turn out to have been mere fabrications. Nowhere does Ben Jelloun offer his reader concrete hope for the discovery of meaning in his work, except as a warning against the deplorable trap of such a search. Perhaps he aims to convince the reader that meaning is an illusory commodity whose pursuit generates webs of a priori assumptions so erroneous that they might ironically be described as a fiction themselves.

But Marc Gontard offers a structural explanation for this aspect of mystification. The protagonist of *L'Enfant de sable*, he submits, inhabits a world dominated by the "secret" which represents the "strange" narrative structure of Ben Jelloun's novel. In the sequel to this novel, *La Nuit sacrée*, this structure becomes more varied but still ends up in the realm of the "strange". (I discuss this transition in *La Nuit sacrée* in my introduction to Chapter 6.)

La mise en œuvre, dans *L'Enfant de sable*, d'un récit méta-narratif qui développe la théorie du récit comme *énigme* nous renvoie à une vision du monde dominée par le *Secret* (comme dans la mystique soufie) où l'Être ici-bas, dont Ahmed-Zahra est la figure ambivalente, ne peut connaître que sa propre étrangeté.

...

Or l'intérêt du roman de Ben Jelloun vient de ce que le récit y pratique une logique modale à plusieurs niveaux pour s'inscrire finalement dans la catégorie de l'étrange où se résoud la dialectique de l'être et du paraître qui oriente le programme narratif. (Gontard, 1993a, 66-7)

I agree that this is the nature of the dialectic invoked by Ben Jelloun in *La Nuit sacrée*, but it is questionable whether any attempt is made to achieve its resolution. I see the category of the "strange" described here as very similar to the Freudian notion of the uncanny in English literature, a notion which by its very nature invites no resolution but indeed mocks any attempt at such a dénouement. Using Todorov as his authority, Gontard defines the strange as the mode where "l'être de l'événement se trouve masqué par un non-paraître ou par un faux-paraître" (67). Thus we are able to perceive the nature of the uncanny but not that which makes it so. The uncanny "knows" its observer but doesn't let itself be known.

Ben Jelloun's opening up of his narrative in such a way as to emphasize this strangeness is related to his concern about the idea of literal foreignness in his work, for the meaning which the culturally distinct North African

immigrant brings to the French cultural space. According to Winifred Woodhull, in contrasting Ben Jelloun and Kristeva's approach to foreignness and political dissidence, it is the actual psychological figure of the foreigner which underpins Freud's concept of the uncanny, but which he attempts to abstract into a reflection of the self.

... Kristeva analyses relations with foreigners in terms of the foreignness within, that is, in terms of Freud's notion of the uncanny—*das Unheimliche* or *l'inquiétante étrangeté*. She notes that in the essay on the uncanny Freud focuses on "death, the female sex, and the 'baleful' unbridled drive", never mentioning foreigners in the connection with the feelings of unease and fascination associated with the uncanny. Freud's "distracted" or "discretion" in this regard embodies an ideal advanced throughout Kristeva's study, that is, a world where there would be no reification of foreigners, no fixation of our own subjectivity, no impulse to reject disturbing feelings arising from within, no need to project our own alterity onto others. (Woodhull, 91)

Where, in Woodhull's analysis, Kristeva attempts to facilitate the assimilation of the uncanny into the individual, Ben Jelloun conversely, emphasizes and accentuates the unease which is a byproduct of foreignness, using it as a device to demonstrate the existence of a bridge between intellectual conceptualization and bodily sensation. His tendency to open up the possibilities of attributing symbolic meanings enhances the ability of his nomadic texts to engender feelings of strangeness in his readers, as a reflection of the feelings of loss, alienation and dislocation which are observable in his characters.

The attempt, which we have observed in Ben Jelloun's writing, to undo the meaning of the literary work itself, has come to be recognized as a characteristic starting point of postmodern writing. Ben Jelloun can be interpreted along the same lines as Beckett, about whom Ihab Hayan writes:

The conclusion of [Beckett's] latest novel, *How It Is*, is that the book is really about "How It Wasn't". Such legerdemain is not frivolous; for the paradox of art employing art to deny itself is rooted in the power of the human consciousness to view itself both as subject and object. Within the mind is the Archimedean point: when the world becomes intolerable, the mind lifts itself to Nirvana or drops into madness. Or it may resort to radical irony in order to reveal art at the end of its tether. Thus in Beckett, literature vigorously unmakes itself, and in Miller, literature pretends, erratically, to be life. (Hayan, 9-10)

The old man in *Jour de silence à Tanger* is preoccupied with the most dramatic of enigmas to confront a human being: the nature of his approaching death. He sets about gathering clues from a friend who almost died, and who saw the face of death as a beautiful young woman (*Jour de silence à Tanger*, 26). He also refuses his medication in an effort to see clearly, to be "more intelligent" than the drugs (33). This episode may be interpreted in a way which provides an interesting parallel with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche vis-à-vis reason, science and the drama of existence. Just as the old man sees medical science in opposition to the necessity to confront the nature of his fate with a clear head, Nietzsche takes a similar angle on the history of scientific thought:

According to Nietzsche, Socrates destroyed the basis of tragic, noble culture through his optimistic faith in reason and science, and thereby destroyed belief in the unfathomable, impenetrable Dionysian core of Being. Further, science is always an escape from the pessimism that should follow from the correct understanding that one cannot penetrate the unfathomable core of Being. (Smith, 78)

The old man in *Jour de silence à Tanger* also rejects this "escape from pessimism" (his monologue is essentially pessimistic, but straightforward). For

Ben Jelloun (a great admirer of Nietzsche), scientific, rational thought destroys the ability to confront the “impenetrable Dionysian core of Being” which provides the essential uncertainty with which he imbues his novels, and which frames the destruction of literary meaning in his works. His old man embraces the uncertainties at the end of his life, running through the possibilities which the clues he gathers offer him, but refusing to pretend to have penetrated the mystery in advance. His speculations on the nature of death are also fantastic and open-ended:

Un rêve m'inquiète. Je l'ai fait tout à l'heure, entre veille et sommeil. J'en parle pour l'oublier, car c'est un rêve du genre insistant qui se confond avec la réalité. J'ai rêvé que j'étais mort. Du coup, toute la famille a accouru. ... Passé la prière de l'après-midi, je n'étais toujours pas encore enterré. ... Entre-temps, je m'étais réveillé. Personne ne fut étonné. Je participais aux discussions concernant les préparatifs de mes funérailles. ... Je crois que, même mort, je continuerais à donner mon avis sur tout et je résisterai ; je ne me laisserai pas faire. (*Jour de silence à Tanger*, 118–9)

We can see that this dream is unusual in the way it combines a fantastic element (the old man's waking up from the dead), with a prosaic one (the continuation of his stubbornness and contrary nature). In fact, the fantastic element is apparently provoked by the prosaic, since it is only to ensure that his burial wishes are carried out that he wakes up. In the same way the symbolologies at work in this episode are apparently trivialized. We cannot help but feel embarrassed by our attempts to attribute excessive significance to the old man's anxiety over the possibility of awakening after his death, since he seems relatively little disturbed by it himself.

Conclusion

That a given sign in a fictional work should have a universally understood meaning is by no means taken for granted by Ben Jelloun. Although he is acutely aware of the preponderance of symbologies which populate the cultural and literary fields in which he chooses to work, he devotes a great deal of his energies to subverting expectations in this regard, and in many cases finishes by providing a source for meanings which are truly eccentric, and therefore unique to each reader. This factor, which has its origins in his poetic roots, may indeed account for his ever-widening appeal as a novelist. Tahar Ben Jelloun undermines established meanings in his works, subverts those meanings, and leaves open the way for new meanings to be established according to the currents of the imagination.

3. RITUAL SUBVERSION

Certain anthropological assumptions about ritual are to a large extent reflected in Ben Jelloun's work. This is especially the case as far as the supposed implication of the body in a ritual is concerned. In this chapter, I follow the anthropological argument that ritual can be interpreted to implicate the body in a verbal structure, thereby assuming power over the body. This verbal structure in turn enables the ritual, with its dependence on bodily participation, to take place. I maintain that this view may be deduced from Ben Jelloun's work. The apparent circularity of this scheme accords extremely well with other manifestations of the co-dependence of subject and narrative in his work. Ritual appears to effect the telling of the story without the need for an intermediary, according to the incorporation scheme described here by Elbaz:

Les ancêtres semblent vouloir parler à travers les corps. Finalement, ce sont les corps qui parlent et ils n'ont aucunement besoin d'une médiation linguistique ou narrative. Les corps racontent leurs histoires en les vivant, en coïncidence avec elles, ils *sont* leurs histoires. (Elbaz, 79)

Ben Jelloun's emphasis on the impact of rituals on individual bodies, moreover, reflects his broader tendency towards the depiction of individualized rituals—those which have been appropriated or invented by his characters to suit their purposes.

3.1 *Individualized Ritual*

Ben Jelloun's appropriation of the social power of rituals for use in his work springs from the revolutionary tradition of the 1960s student revolt in which he took part, and which occurred more or less simultaneously in many countries of the world, including Morocco. Colette Nys-Mazure notes the effect this period had on the young writer:

Étudiant à Rabat, il est bouleversé par les émeutes de mars 1965 dans plusieurs villes et notamment à Casablanca, où des gamins, des hommes, des femmes sans travail sont descendus dans les rues. Il ressent une blessure essentielle et s'oriente vers l'action écrite : *À défaut d'avoir agi, il fallait dire, rapporter la clameur populaire.* (Nys-Mazure, 55)

Among those writers who experienced this era during the formation of their careers we can find many who express the desire, more or less explicitly, to appropriate the assumed power-enhancing rituals which represent the status quo, for their own ends. An illustration which demonstrates clearly the extent to which rituals can be imagined to hold power over human life, while actually delineating the development I have described, can be found in Tom Robbins' 1976 novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*:

Ritual, usually, is an action or ceremony employed to create a unity of mind among a congregation or community. The Clock People see the keeping of the clockworks as the *last* of the *communal* rituals. With the destruction of the clockworks, that is, at the end of time, all rituals will be personal and idiosyncratic, serving not to unify a community/cult in a common cause but to link each single individual with the universe in whatever manner suits him or her best. ... Thus, paradoxically, the replacement of societal with individual rituals will bring about an ultimate unity vastly more universal than the plexus of communal

rites that presently divides peoples into unwieldy, agitating and competing groups. (Robbins, 218–9)

This all-encompassing ritual of Robbins' own invention itself seeks to embody what is seen here as the historic trend towards eccentric, individualized rituals, thereby actually setting the scene for the end of time itself with the expected destruction of the "clockworks" by an outside force. At the same time it retains elements of the classic conceptualization of ritual which is evident in the plays of Wole Soyinka, as examined in the article by William S. Haney II:

In "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," he states that "ritual is the language of the masses" ... For Soyinka, ritual experience provides a means for the individual to become integrated into the community and to attain "a renewed mythic awareness". (Haney II, 36)

Robbins' ritual, while eclectic in nature, is the binding force which defines the family relationships of the Clock People and allows them to participate in a "mythic awareness" which involves them in an apocalyptic vision of the world and the coming age, thus fitting the definition of a classic ritual also.

Such a grand and fantastic vision as Robbins' clockworks is not to be gleaned from Ben Jelloun's treatment of the subject. However, he too seems interested in the problem of time—as we shall discuss with relation to his references to Jorge Luis Borges—and one can see a relationship between Ben Jelloun's idiosyncratic rituals and the apparent unravelling of time in his novels, particularly in *La Prière de l'absent*. In this novel we follow the progress of an individualized ritual: that of a pilgrimage "back to the origins" of the infant protagonist, which seems to result in a confusion of time and space in which little seems to be resolved. In the closing stages of the novel, Sindibad, waiting with Argane and Yamna in the "village de

l'attente", has at least gained enough insight into the meaning of his journey to ponder:

Leur aventure ressemblait à un jardin dont les sentiers bifurquaient dans la tête d'un conteur qui ne savait plus où mener ses personnages. (*La Prière de l'absent*, 217)

In this reference to the short story "The Garden of Forking Paths", by Jorge Luis Borges, we see an elaboration of that story's idea of the inexorable circularity of time and space which is manifested in uncanny coincidences and the inevitability of fate (see also page 137). In Ben Jelloun's version, however, it is the expectation of the playing out of fate which is consistently disappointed. Does this section of *La Prière de l'absent* actually depict a fantasy realm where time has already ceased to exist, and where, to paraphrase Robbins, each individual strives to be linked directly to the universe? Or does Ben Jelloun go further? This ritual journey does appear to have quite fundamental ramifications for his characters' individual concept of time and reality. As Sindibad remarks further:

À partir de Marrakech, les lieux, chemins et villages, devenaient mouvants, des images inventées, des tourbillons et des visions absolument incertaines. (217)

When the group learns that one of the towns through which they have passed is destroyed in an earthquake, the purpose of the journey becomes fatally fragmented.

Ils se sentaient abandonnés, vidés des convictions et vérités qui les maintenaient en vie sur le chemin des origines. Tout se démolissait en eux, lentement, avec le sentiment de l'irréversible. Ils se désagrégeaient, se fêlaient peu à peu. (219)

The fragmentation of the ritual journey's purpose leads to the fragmentation of the characters themselves. They feel empty, victims of the inexorable nature of the progressing narrative to which they are subject. Their

version of the classic *haj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, fails to reach its imagined object, and opens up the way for anxious speculation on the possibilities for the journey's meaning.

This apparent fragmentation of the characters' purpose is a phenomenon which Kamel Ben Ouanes prefigures in an article in which he describes the "identité vacillante" of Ben Jelloun's characters. His analysis also recalls the received wisdom about the function of collective rituals:

Le moi est confronté à une sorte d'altérité qui fait de lui un être aux contours changeants, un contenant évacuant son contenu pour accueillir une nouvelle configuration ou une nouvelle identité. Ce qui signifie que le personnage refuse son statut initial, celui par lequel il est socialement désigné et connu, en vue d'embrasser une autre identité et de choisir un nouvel ordre où la liberté d'action est permise, ou faute de quoi, la liberté de la parole est garantie. (Ben Ouanes, 36)

If this description has all the air of a ritual purging, in the same vein as a rite of passage through which the subject gains his independence, it is no surprise that the continuation of Ben Ouanes's article utilizes identical terminology to that employed to describe these rituals:

C'est vers cet objectif que tend toute l'action du personnage : devenir UN SUJET PARLANT. Pour y parvenir, trois conditions sont à remplir : ...

Rompre avec le passé personnel afin d'adhérer à un passé collectif qui engage toute l'entité culturelle d'une communauté. ...

Au terme de ce schéma initiatique le personnage accède alors à la parole ou mieux encore renaît sous les traits d'une nouvelle identité. (36)

It is clear that such a separation from individual heritage in favour of a collective one is analogous to the function of collective rituals. The fact that

Ben Ouanes identifies this aspect in character development in Ben Jelloun's work might be seen as ironic in the light of our examination of the author's apparent emphasis on individualized ritual. Indeed there seems to be a contradiction in the implication that conformity to a communal heritage gives the characters the power to speak which they had previously lacked. But in Ben Jelloun's fictional scheme, this may represent an initiation step which must later be followed by a rebellion which utilizes the same structure in an individual quest.

In support of the idea of a valid application for individual ritual processes, William S. Haney's article on the ritual drama of Wole Soyinka makes the point that the playwright's work has equal value, when read by an individual, as it does when performed in a group context:

Like the religious rituals from which it originates, theatrical performance involves collective experiences that lead the performers and audience to a higher state of spiritual insight. Even the individual experience of reading a dramatic text has a transcendental effect. It may not have the social impact and power of a collective experience, but it is no less valid for its greater subjectivity, which in Vedic poetics is called "aesthetic rapture".
(Haney II, 35-6)

This "transcendental effect" is also reflected in narrative analysis of Ben Jelloun's work, such as that carried out by Marc Gontard, whose treatment of the enigmatic nature of the author's narrative in *L'Enfant de sable* concludes that the various techniques which he employs point inevitably towards the implication of the reader's concept of the "beyond" into the text. Under the rubric "*Récit labyrinthique et mystère du Secret*", Gontard affirms the labyrinthine structure as the deliberate introduction of an insoluble problem into the text, which implicates the beyond, or that which is not only external to the text, but also external to the reader's understanding, as the only hope for resolution:

L'autre effet de sens que l'on peut dégager de la pratique narrative de Ben Jelloun découle de la mise en place, comme chez Barthes ou Borgès, d'un récit labyrinthique mais qui, ici, renvoyant à une mystique du Secret et de l'ineffable, permet le retour de la métaphysique comme réponse à l'angoisse existentielle...

Si le récit affirme sa propre impossibilité, n'est-ce pas parce que le mystère du réel ne peut être résolu que dans un au-delà du type transcendantal. (Gontard, 1993b, 117)

By examining these similar interpretations of two very different writers, we see that Ben Jelloun's work, while perhaps not necessarily aiming to provide that which Haney refers to as "a higher state of spiritual insight", operates within the assumption that the transcendental function of ritual extends even to the mere evocation of the principle of ritual. Ben Jelloun may be performing a kind of Vedic "aesthetic rapture" in miniature when he evokes the transcendental power of rituals and appropriates that power in his own fashion. His creation of a "récit labyrinthique" creates the foundation for this reaching out of the text into external reality, and thereby allows the subjective response to rituals in the text to mimic their function in life.

Gontard's commentary seems to perceive a hope for resolution that is not there, however, for if we accept that Ben Jelloun's text does not pretend to be reality, then the transcendental nature of the labyrinth in the story refers merely to the world external to the text, i.e. the reader's world. This construct may mimic the way the beyond is conceived in life, but if it does, rather than pointing to its resolution in the "beyond" it in fact contradicts the hope for a resolution of the problem in life, since the text itself resists resolution even by the reader—inhabitant of the "beyond" of the text. In this sense it affirms "l'angoisse essentielle" rather than providing a response to it, as Gontard claims.

In contrast to Ben Jelloun, and on closer analysis, Robbins' scheme seems merely to bring up to date the assumed purpose for rituals in a nineteen-seventies context without attempting to change their basic *modus operandi*. In fact, even his grand vision fits perfectly into Bell's broad-sweeping classical definition, which she distils from the literature:

... there is a surprising degree of consistency in the descriptions of ritual: ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing cultural or social forces come together. Examples include the ritual integration of belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative ideal. (Bell, 16)

We need not go into the detail of Robbins' work here, but it is salient to point out that his ritual of the clockworks includes elements of each one of these conceptual dichotomies. And crucially, Robbins' work attempts, erratically, to *resolve* these dichotomies. Ben Jelloun's, on the other hand, tries determinedly to undermine the dichotomies as such, to muddy the waters surrounding such distinctions and thereby prevent the certainty necessary to resolving them—especially in the case of the last: “the real and the imaginative ideal”. Ben Jelloun instead uses the perceived transcendental nature of ritual to confuse the issues surrounding what is real and what is imaginary. Both within the world of his novels, where the relationship between imagination and reality is explicitly debated (without resolution), and in the very structure of the novels, with their insistence on the unresolvable mystery of the story's provenance (physical book or verbal retelling?) and its veracity, Ben Jelloun's vision seems as idiosyncratic as the rituals foretold by Robbins.

3.2 Body ritual and “emptiness”

In order to make the point that Ben Jelloun’s real subject when talking about ritual is in fact the narrative, I will refer to the interpretation of one critic who analyses Ben Jelloun’s discussion of circumcision, and I will provide a contrasting interpretation of my own.

The ritual of male circumcision appears in the form of a charade in the novel *L’Enfant de sable*, where Ahmed’s father cuts his finger to simulate the spilling of blood (32). But this is not the first appearance of this ritual in Ben Jelloun’s works; it is merely the first time its meaning is distorted by this kind of play-acting. Ben Jelloun explores the resonances of this most essential of ancient Semitic practices in his début novel *Harrouda* (39–46).

Although there is a tendency to ascribe erroneous meanings to the performance of the ritual (see page 18), it seems obvious that this event in a boy’s life is the occasion for drama and some kind of reaction, at least on the psychological level, which serves to reinforce a hierarchy of power in the relationships of the participants. I would hesitate to go as far as Jean Déjeux does in the following quotation, however, where he makes what seems to me an all too literal interpretation of the act as presented by Ben Jelloun.

Dès l’enfance donc, le garçon est un être sans. Il fait son entrée dans la société, au nom de Dieu, par une blessure du corps qui l’atteint dans son sexe. ... « Au commencement était la mutilation », écrit Ben Jelloun dans son roman. (Déjeux, 1993, 275–6)

Indeed, the narrator, as a boy, does feel that he will be “without”, but it is not suggested that this fear is justified or literally realized: “J’ai cru que je l’avais perdu, que j’allais être sans. On me l’avait bien dit” (*Harrouda*, 40). In fact, it is merely a question of his imagination running out of control, in response to the approach of the mysterious procedure and the taunting of a malicious female cousin. The girl provides a foreshadowing of the

analogous episode in *L'Enfant de sable* with her offer to take his place in the ceremony:

« Je suis née sans, me disait-elle ; et on te le coupera à partir de la racine ? Le pauvre ! mais il faut résister, il ne faut pas te laisser faire. ... » (*Harrouda*, 41)

There are, on the contrary, many indications that the “being without” obliquely refers to what could be described as an emptiness of meaning surrounding the ceremony. It is possible to interpret this emptiness of meaning, too, as the result of a ritual which is essentially one that involves removal, negation.

Pour le baptême on égorge un mouton : le sang doit couler dans le sens du levant. On nomme par le sang. Au seuil de la vie : la cendre/le sacrifice.

Pour la circoncision on ne nomme pas ; on délivre l'âge d'homme ; un passeport pour le devenir de la virilité. Un signe trouve son espace à l'intérieur d'une autre violence : lecture des choses. ...

« ... Et surtout ne fais pas honte ; pas de panique ! Pas de peur ! Pas de larmes. ... Tu ne sentiras rien. ... Fais-toi absent... un signe insaisissable. » (39–40)

This negation is couched in unusual terms which suggest that the real subject here is narrative. This passage juxtaposes references to naming, signs, keys (“passeport”), with invocations of negation (“fais-toi absent” etc.). Absence of meaning is an invitation to naming; the removal of the foreskin is a parallel invitation to the acceptance of manhood. In both cases negation *invites* narrative, rather than actually producing it. Indeed, Ben Jelloun uses the invitation to defy expectation, taking full advantage of the ambiguity of the ceremony to deliberately confuse the characters of the narrator and his female cousin:

On me dit, pour me consoler, que l'exécutant s'était donné beaucoup de mal et que tout s'était bien passé. Il avait évité de justesse l'hémorragie. Mais je ne pensais plus au sang coagulé sur ma chair ; je ne pensais plus à l'ouverture opérée dans le bruit et la fanfare. Je tendais la main désespérément pour mesurer ce qui subsistait encore de mon pénis. Ma main ne rencontrait qu'un trou douloureux. j'étais déjà sans

(44, *sic*, see page 127)

The narrator here is clearly an amalgam of the boy and his girl cousin and experiencing a fantastic combination of both of their coming-of-age rituals simultaneously. Meanings become clouded as the circumcision turns into an imagined castration with concurrent suggestions of menstruation or, perhaps more probably, the breaking of the hymen. Ben Jelloun returns the ritual to the moment before it had its meaning to reconstruct one from the imagination of the young boy.

My interpretation of Ben Jelloun's evocation of the circumcision ritual is more or less generally applicable to his writing when rituals form the subject: for Ben Jelloun, as for many anthropologists, any ritual does indeed invite the generation of a narrative (whether or not the ritual is performed with this in mind). As a narrative this process depends on signs, and keys to interpret the signs, in order to function. From this starting-point Ben Jelloun exploits the common interpretation of ritual to explore the possibilities of narrative that become apparent when the body is somehow implicated in the text.

Ben Jelloun's exploration of these possibilities, in contrast to anthropological analysis, and indeed the interpretation made here by Déjeux, leaves definitions open to further invite tension and uncertainty into the drama. In this he reflects a fundamental criticism which is levelled against anthropology in Catherine Bell's text:

... the notion of a fundamental social contradiction appears highly suspicious—at least by virtue of the way in which the im-

position of a neat logical structure renders ritual action amenable to theoretical analysis ... Roy Wagner states that "anthropology is theorized and taught so as to *rationalize* contradiction, paradox and dialectic." (Bell, 37)

Ben Jelloun's use of these ritual elements, on the other hand, actually emphasizes these contradictions. His evocation of social ritual serves merely to underscore the hypocrisies and the inconsistencies of his society. For example, the treatment of circumcision is shown ironically to contribute to ambiguity with regard to gender differentiation, in a society where gender roles are paramount.

In the example above Ben Jelloun plays on the fact that the ceremony involves removal to allude to the generation of narrative: he is writing, here, about the way the creation of a narrative involves in some way the removal of the physical object of that narrative—the signifier takes the place, literally, of the signified. The writer creates something intangible and thus "without" physicality in the same way that the boy is given a story, or the key to interpret it, with the removal of something physical.

However, there is no reason to assume that Ben Jelloun himself actually interprets the function of circumcision as providing the participant with a story upon which to base his life. This interpretation has meaning only in a literary sense, performing an almost ludic function in the sense that it plays on the received truths about ritual. It is an interpretation which works primarily on the level of the fictional work, exploring what is possible in the realm of the imagination.

Othman Ben Taleb refers to this characteristic of Ben Jelloun's texts in relation to the form of the novel *Harrouda*, and uses the ludic aspect of the text as an actual starting-point of his analysis:

—Le texte est d'abord une activité *ludique*, un travail sur la forme, traitement particulier du signifiant. L'originalité du texte est d'abord dans un style, dans l'art de "travailler" les mots et avec les mots. Cette empreinte esthétique est le support premier

de toute lecture. *Harrouda* est, de ce point de vue, l’écriture parallèle, la récurrence obsédante de la figure féminine, la violence du verbe, le méta-récit, l’hégémonie isotopique du sexe, l’inter-discursivité énonciative, etc. (Ben Taleb, 52)

Although the boy’s conflict with his cousin demonstrates the functioning of this last definition (l’hégémonie isotopique du sexe), we might add that the aesthetic work of *Harrouda* is one of defining the very generation of the story itself, of literally playing on its own genesis.

Déjeux approaches directly the implication of the body in Ben Jelloun’s narrative of ritual redefinitions through the same concept of the *être-sans*. This definition seems to suggest a paradox which is not resolved by Déjeux, since he fails to deal with the relative lack of success which the father’s machinations have in turning a male child into a female one. Déjeux’s analysis is psychological:

Niée dans sa personnalité sexuelle réelle, elle est un être-sans : elle est expropriée de son corps de femme par la violence de la parole paternelle. (Déjeux, 1993, 279)

Unless we assume this statement to be metaphorical or meant in a purely psychological sense, it is obvious that the mere “parole” of the father is insufficient to deprive the daughter of her physical female body. Déjeux backs up his statement by pointing out that Ahmed at one point narrates “Je n’ose pas me regarder dans le miroir” (279).

Rather than indicate a deprivation of the body, however, this admission actually emphasizes the presence of the body and the conflict engendered by the father’s attempt to suppress the physical by means of the imagination. The attempt at removing the physical and replacing it with the fictional creates a new drama, providing the structure for dramatic tension in the novel; but as an attempt at removing the physical per se, it instead heightens the problematic of the relationship between the real and the fictional.

The result is to examine the interdependence of these dialectical extremes (the physical and the verbal) in fiction in the same terms as the study of ritual does for anthropological phenomena. To sum up these terms I once again refer to the succinct review of the literature by Bell:

For Foucault, the body is “the place where the most minute and local social practices are linked up with the large-scale organization of power”. The body is a political field: “Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” The body is the most basic and fundamental level of power relations, the “microphysics” of the micropolitics of power. Ritualization, Foucault appears to imply, is a central way that power operates; it constitutes a political technology of the body. (Bell, 202)

This concept of ritual as a “political technology of the body” can have no wittier illustration than that provided by the protagonist of *Tristram Shandy*, who jokingly attributes the very misfortune of his Christian name (and therefore his fictional identity) in part to not having been born a Catholic. This eventuality prevented him, as he explains, from being baptized prior to birth. He lampoons Rome’s allowance of a rather bizarre modification of the baptism ritual, whereby the endangered foetus is baptized by injection, and appends to an account of the deliberations on the matter from the *Conseil des Docteurs de Sorbonne* the following suggestion:

Mr Tristram Shandy’s compliments to Messrs. Le Moyne, De Romigny, and De Marcilly . . . He begs to know, whether after the ceremony of marriage, and before that of consummation, the baptising all the Homunculi at once, slapdash, by injection, would not be a shorter and safer cut still; on condition, as above, That if the Homunculi do well, and come safe into the

world after this, that each and every one of them will be baptised again (*sous condition*)—And provided, in the second place, That the thing can be done, which Mr Shandy apprehends it may, *par le moyen d’une petite canulle*, and *sans faire aucun tort au pere*. (Sterne, 44, *sic*)

The historic distortions of classical Christian rituals under the Catholic Church have long provided an easy target for English comedians, but this example is enlightening for us particularly in its highlighting of gender roles, the reversal of which lend the air of ludicrousness to the original (modified) ritual. The doctors’ insistence, in belt-and-braces fashion, that the foetus, if surviving, be baptized again, allows Sterne’s surreal subversion of the idea of baptism—in which he uses the euphemism of the *homunculus*¹ to refer to sperm—without actually endangering the ritual’s intent. In all this, the Church’s apparent control of the bodies of its congregation is shown to reach absurd proportions.

Just as ritual is a political technology of the body in real life, implicating therefore a larger group than those who actually engage in it, so the use of ritual in fiction implicates more than just the characters in the work. Real-life ritualistic schemes “tend to be experienced as deriving from powers or realities beyond the community and its activities, such as God or tradition, thereby depicting and testifying to the ultimate organization of the cosmos” (206). Ritual in a work of fiction can similarly “reach out” into the real world of the reader, implicating the reader and the author in the delineation of the novel’s reality, for ours is the realm we experience as immediately “beyond the community” of the novel, from where we assume the characters must imagine their rituals derive. The “organization of the cosmos” in the same way becomes the perceived organization of the world inhabited by the author, and into which the fictional characters cannot see. Nevertheless fictional rituals implicate the author and reader in the same

¹ Literally “little man”: refers to the idea of humans produced artificially. Cf. Goethe’s *Faust*.

way that real rituals can be said to implicate God; the subtle difference is that the reader *knows* the author is watching.

3.3 *Ritual meanings*

The power that ritual is purported to have over the body often enters the realm of what western thinking pejoratively refers to as “magic”. But in terms of a fictional work, where scarcely any restrictions of provability exist, this magical tendency provides a fount of narrative structures independent of restraints of objectivity, but which are already well understood by the reader.

A good example of an actual ritual which proposes to exert an apparently absolute magical control over the body, as well as implicating language on a fundamental level, is described by R. H. Beal:

When soldiers were inducted into the Hittite army, they and/or their junior officers had to take an elaborate oath. ... “... He places in their hands a [male] figurine, its belly filled with water. He says, ‘See the man who previously took this oath before the gods and then broke it. The oath-gods seized him. His belly is swollen. ... May the oath-gods seize whoever breaks these oaths. May his belly swell.’...” (Beal, 63–64)

Although not all rituals implicate the body in their supposed effects as well as in the need for some type of performance, such implication is however a unique quality of ritual, and it is well to note how far the tendency to implicate the body can extend. It is this tendency to exert a seemingly impossible influence over the body, by means of incantations and performance, which is interesting to us in terms of the incorporation of rituals as a structure in the fictional work.

Fiction also tries, in various ways, to bridge the gap between its living readership and the work, but employs what we might think of as the reverse technique to ritual: representations of the living are incorporated in

the text, which the reader reaches in to, so to speak, in order to make a parallel with the world he experiences directly. A ritual such as the one cited above, conversely, reaches out to the experienced reality of the participants, weaving the story into the physical reality of its performers. At the same time it provides a representation of an essentially erroneous version of that reality which they then map onto their interpretation of their everyday experience.

To use rituals, as Ben Jelloun does, as a device of fiction, manipulating the reader's expectations both of fiction and of the magical world of ritual, is to set up, in Borgesian fashion, a pair of parallel mirrors which reflect his narrative down an infinite corridor. The result is a situation where interpretation (or decoding), at least in the simplistic sense of attributing meaning to allusory elements, is impossible or at best irrelevant. It is likely that Ben Jelloun concurs in general with the theory which Borges describes here:

(In the psychological fragments by Novalis and in that volume of Machen's autobiography called *The London Adventure* there is a similar hypothesis: that the outer world—forms, temperatures, the moon—is a language we humans have forgotten or which we can scarcely distinguish. . . It is also declared by De Quincy: 'Even the articulate or brutal sounds of the globe must all be so many languages or ciphers that somewhere have their corresponding keys—have their own grammar and syntax; and thus the least things in the universe must be secret mirrors to the greatest.') ("The Mirror of Enigmas," 244, parentheses *sic*)

The intriguing factor for Ben Jelloun as well as for the writers mentioned here is the fact that codes that are so easily perceived are nevertheless only with great difficulty deciphered. To explain this apparent anomaly requires an all-embracing hypothesis like the one Borges outlines here.

Elbaz goes even further in his interpretation of Ben Jelloun's work, in an analysis which aligns itself perilously closely to the meta-narrative it

describes, to attribute to Ben Jelloun a discourse in which reality and fiction are united:

Harrouda va donc leur inculquer ce langage neuf, langage du corps non-médiatisé par les mots, langage de l'immédiat où le signifié et le signifiant se fondent l'un dans l'autre, langage comprenant sa signification en dehors de toute relation arbitraire dans le signe, langage qui est nécessité, puisqu'il coïncide indéfiniment avec lui-même, performé et à jamais renouvelé. En bref, langage qui est *vie*. (Elbaz, 81)

But this equivalence of *signifié* and *signifiant* may be too simplistic. This new language appears to me to take from, and add to, the involvement of the body in ritual. In rituals the body speaks by doing, and when an essentially verbal entity such as a novel appropriates this characteristic, it emphasizes the speaking aspect of it. We then witness a sleight of hand whereby this language changes the points of contact between "la vie" and fiction. The mediatory role of "les mots" is removed from between the body and life and placed at the top of the hierarchy, contacting both what we perceive as experienced reality and the concept of fiction itself. It is for this reason that the reader is aware in Ben Jelloun's writing of the fictionalization process itself. The body speaks but fiction itself speaks also, making itself known as such.

3.4 *Marking the body*

In the collection of poems written for the book *Fès*, Ben Jelloun shows a fascination for the artisans and tanners of the city, and especially for the effect their occupation visibly has on their bodies. This is also reflected in the preoccupation of the photographer for the men and boys with hands and feet stained bright yellow, and the bright red skins laid out to dry on every available patch of open land around the city. In Ben Jelloun's words:

Les traverses se superposent
Entre les mains des artisans
Des mains pleines de couleurs
Rongées par le bruit et la rouille (Barbey et al., 8)

The tanners, at the same time as they are dyeing their bodies, also participate in a ritual which implicates their “soul and destiny”. In effect, they are giving themselves up to the will of the city which demands their labours. They ritually mask their bodies from the influence of their own desires:

Ils plongent leurs mains dans l’eau chaude
Eau trouble et lourde
Ils plongent l’âme et le destin
Dans la marmite des couleurs
La tête pleine
La tête encombrée de couleurs (52)

But the colouring of their bodies also has implications for the status of language in Ben Jelloun’s work. Charles Bonn undertakes an analysis of *Harrouda* based on the opposing concepts of transparency and opacity. In his mind, the author draws on recent Maghrebian tradition in his use of this opposition:

Tahar Benjelloun a donc renouvelé l’opposition connue dans les littératures maghrébines récentes entre la ville-transparence et l’opacité terrienne, en faisant miroiter à nos yeux les prestiges de la ville-texte. . . . Fass est à la fois la blancheur de ses notables, la transparence de la parole, et l’opacité, la couleur chez ses artisans, l’obscurité de ses retraites, le « résidu gris ». L’écriture de ces oppositions est le texte de la ville, qui les contient et qu’elles contiennent sans qu’un élément extérieur n’y participe. (Bonn, 14)

So the tanners, with the opacity of the mask in which they cloak their very skin, represent the cloak of non-language which sets the country off from the city, but which the city, by the trick of language, is able to encompass within itself. This opacity is itself a type of language in Ben Jelloun's texts, the language characterized by Bonn as the language of hashish.

« Peuple non élu », les artisans sont marqués par la couleur, signe de leur trop grande communication avec la terre. Les tanneurs de Fass « sont damnés car le safran a coloré leurs mains, leurs bras, leur ventre, leurs testicules... / c'est écrit sur leurs corps... / le tort / leur tort est de vivre près de la terre ... » Or, si la transparence du verbe citadin devient vite irréalité (Tanger-la-trahison n'est-elle pas dissoute dans la fumée du kif consommé d'ailleurs par les artisans?), « seule la couleur est vraie, concrète et foudroyante. Seule la couleur est violence intégrée dans le corps ». (15)

Language is ambivalent, evanescent, where the rituals which involve the body are firm and penetrating, fixing the lives of the artisans and providing a point of reference for the "real".

Bonn discusses another ritualistic colouring of the body in *Harrouda*: the Rifains who visit the city with their bodies painted brown.

Pourtant la couleur terrienne par excellence est le brun. Les rifains arrivant à la ville « ont peint leur corps couleur de la terre », affirmant du même coup leur inquiétante différence ... (18)

This ritual shares the characteristic of rituals in later works by Ben Jelloun, of setting the participants apart from the people around them in some way. Here it is a case of a separate distinct group of people, where later we see individuals setting themselves apart from their peers by similar methods.

Just as its inhabitants are implicated bodily in the text, the body of the city also becomes implicated by a ritual incorporation into the work. She

effectively becomes another character, alongside her inhabitants. The city of Fez, for example, is personified by Ben Jelloun as a woman of unfortunate destiny, and the terms used by Ben Jelloun to describe her lay great emphasis on the city's sexual aspect, and therefore also stress the parallel with the human body:

Vieille princesse aux amants infidèles
Grande dame aux pieds nus
La chevelure lâchée dans la cour du palais ...
Fès est assise
Les jambes écartées et attend
Séville et Grenade. (16)

The upheavals of Fez the city are spoken of as the trials of a human body, and these upheavals are reflected in the bodies which inhabit her:

J'ai vu des pieds piétiner des corps
J'ai vu des femmes courir dans la mosquée des
hommes ...
Et Fès
La vieille cité
Essayait d'éteindre le feu avec ses larmes
(*Poésie complète*, 557)

Not only does Ben Jelloun give the city the characteristics of a human being, but also the feelings and the character of one. In his depiction of Tangier, the city grows old, she gets tired, her heart is broken from the suffering of her people. She is an empathetic figure in the pantheon of Ben Jelloun's characters, and, as a city which is also human, she relies upon human bodily functions to deal with her distress and that of her people. The metaphor of her humanity finishes by being the most succinct way of explaining the biological nature of the city, and the essential emotional quality of its history and its development. It also reflects the intensely

personal relationship which Tahar Ben Jelloun has with the city of his birth. In the following passage from an interview with the author and quoted by Colette Nys-Mazure, Ben Jelloun admits to an extraordinary depth of feeling for the city on a personal level:

Toute ville natale porte en son ventre un peu de cendre. Fès m'a rempli la bouche de terre jaune et de poussière grise. [...] Quand je marche dans ses rues, je laisse mes doigts sur la pierre et je traîne mes mains sur les murs jusqu'à les écorcher et en lécher le sang. (Nys-Mazure, 54)

In this interview we see that the literal feeling which the author has for the city is hardly different from the literary personification he gives it in his poetry as well as in his novels. In this passage we are also reminded of the extraordinary compulsion with which Ben Jelloun involves his body in his relationship to the objects of his fiction, literally mixing his very blood with the physical source of his narratives.

Ben Jelloun's personification of the city continues with his familiar pre-occupation with the symbol of wounding. He also manages to implicate the concept of the story as a solid, physical thing into this idea at the same time. This seems like a technique of mystification, but Ben Jelloun, in his prose as well as his poetry, sees nothing wrong with speaking of the stories which are always told about a place as a tactile characteristic of the place itself.

C'est que la ville est elle-même
Solitude souveraine
Grandiose et hautaine.
Chaque pierre est une blessure
Une histoire mal contée.
(*Poésie complète*, 561)

In the novel *L'Enfant de sable*, Ben Jelloun takes the concept of textualization of the body to the extreme of the protagonist's manipulation of

gender, and in the following novel *La Nuit de l'erreur*, Tangier also appears as a woman:

Il ne pouvait pas savoir que Tanger était une vieille femme aux joues peintes avec la chaux vive, une femme pleine de malice et de ressource, tantôt une vamp des années trente, tantôt une femme d'intérieur, silencieuse et redoutable quand elle retirait son voile. (*La Nuit de l'erreur*, 98)

In *La Nuit de l'erreur*, the protagonist Zina is identified with the city as proof of the curse over it:

« ... Zina est un indice, la preuve qu'on cherche à ruiner Tanger, à la défigurer, à la jeter aux chiens et aux loups affamés » ;
« Zina-Tanger/Tanger-Zina. » (101)

Déjeux extends the parallel himself in commenting on the novel *Harrouda*:

Quant à Tanger, elle est la ville de la dérive, de la débauche et de la perdition. Pas de milieu : être dans la mère ou dans la putain, dans Fès ou dans Tanger. (Déjeux, 1993, 281)

As this critic deliberately emphasizes in his phraseology, the relationship which Ben Jelloun builds up between the city and the characters which he has chosen to represent it is one which refers directly to the body; the “body” of the city is equated with Harrouda’s body which becomes a symbol of the city’s offering of itself by becoming a haven for prostitution, as well as drug-trafficking and the incursion of western traits, while Fez remains pure in the sense of a mother-figure, still welcoming into her “body” but this time in the sense of a pregnant mother.

3.5 Vulnerability and the body

The author’s apparent preoccupation with the human body as a concept seems to be characterized and motivated by a concern for vulnerability,

and this is expressed by the symbol of wounding. He interprets the role of the writer per se as one concerned with the dispossessed and the wounded, as affirmed by the critic Jean Déjeux who cites him:

« L'écrivain est un homme solitaire. Son territoire est celui de la blessure, celle infligée aux hommes dépossédés. » ... Ben Jelloun déclarait encore en 1987 qu'il avait toujours été « hanté par la blessure », que c'était pour cela que dans ces romans tous ses personnages « tournaient autour de la femme et de l'enfance ».
(Déjeux, 1993, 273)

In fact, since *Harrouda*, his first novel, he has persisted in presenting an uneasy connection between the bodies of his numerous female characters and their vulnerability—or, conversely, their power, especially, but not exclusively, in a sexual context. *Harrouda*, the protagonist in Ben Jelloun's eponymous novel, is a prostitute in the streets of Fez who represents for the men of the city both the character of the city itself and the path to their sexual maturity. Her blatant displays of sexuality and outrageous acts of vulgarity therefore represent a challenge to the assumed propriety of Fez society and also an attempt to rebel against an oppressive authority. This is shown also by the sympathy expressed for her by the narrator on behalf of the children who know her, with respect to the other adults who mistreat her sexually: he identifies the adult world as a power which dominates both her and the children.

3.6 *Problems of narrative power/responsibility*

The implication of a power struggle wherever the body is the subject of the narrative highlights the difficulty of analysing Ben Jelloun's use of conflicting narrators. Many critics, understandably, take the simple route of assuming Ben Jelloun himself to be identifiable with the first-person narrator if he is male, and an empathetic substitute in the case of an obviously

female storyteller. Where this approach creates problems of consistency, this is, often erroneously, attributed in turn to the author. Actually the unease Ben Jelloun's narrative manages to create among even experienced critics goes some way towards supporting what I believe to be his motivation in tethering the idea of the power struggle to that of the body: a narrative which incorporates the body irrevocably involves the reader also, achieving a further blurring of the boundaries between reader and fiction.

Consider the interpretation of the Swiss reviewer Isolde Schaad, who first praises Ben Jelloun's treatment of his protagonist's developing sexual identity in *La Nuit sacrée*, then condemns it, in both cases equally erroneously, in my opinion, because both judgements ignore the conscious attempt both to involve and to disturb the reader. Schaad shows her own involvement, however, as she condemns its unpleasant effect:

In « La nuit sacrée » (« Nacht der Unschuld ») erforscht Zahra ihren Körper. Ben Jellouns Beschreibung ist fast sexualpädagogisch genau ... dass es eine Lust ist ... dann gerät sie unter den schweratmenden, stossenden Leib eines Landstreichers, ein Akt der « gewissen Lust » für die Kindfrau. Halt! Sie sind entlarvt, Monsieur Ben Jelloun, denn hier wird Ihre Männerphantasie ganz allgemein. ... ich bin jetzt ein wenig enttäuscht von Ihnen, wo Sie mich vorher verblüfften, mit Ihrer erotischen Empathie. (Schaad, 68)

[In "La Nuit sacrée" ("Night of Innocence"[sic]) Zahra explores her body. Ben Jelloun's description is almost so sex-educationally exact ... that it's a joy [to read] ... then she gets under the heavy-breathing, thrusting body of a tramp, an act of "sheer desire" for the young woman. Stop! You are exposed, Monsieur Ben Jelloun, for here your male fantasy becomes quite common. ... now I'm a little disappointed with you, where before you amazed me with your erotic empathy.]

Although Schaad goes on to mitigate her condemnation, she fails to realize the import of her own reaction to the text: she is both attracted and revolted by the story. Schaad's reaction, while appropriate, demonstrates the way the body becomes involved in a text—even the reader's body is implicated by what she reads. That a story about a girl attempting to regain lost control and power over her body should demonstrate the reality of that power, even down to the almost physical reaction of the reader to the story itself, should not be surprising. "Erotic empathy" is one aspect of a text's influence over the bodies of its readers, but disgust is indeed no less so. Ben Jelloun's metanarrative concerns the nature of the text, and the way in which it can actually manifest itself physically. He remains conscious of the reactions of the reader in exploring the possibilities of this idea, and explores it to its boundaries, as even Schaad admits confusingly:

Ich nehme an, dass Sie das beabsichtigt haben, denn Ihr Bewusstsein als Teilnehmer eines akuten Patriarchates ist, wie ich lese, dermassen trainiert, dass Ihnen so etwas nicht als Lapsus unterläuft. . . (Schaad, 68)

[I accept that you saw it coming, because your consciousness as participant in an extreme patriarchy is, as I read it, practised to such an extent, that something like this could not catch you unawares.]

Schaad's commentary underlines the difficulty of separating Tahar Ben Jelloun the engaged political commentator from Tahar Ben Jelloun the writer. So well known is he in French public life that critics such as Schaad never even consider the possibility of confusing the two, nor the impossibility for the author to fill both roles in every utterance. As Colette Nys-Mazure comments:

On sait Tahar Ben Jelloun en butte aux attaques de ceux qui lui reprochent un manque d'engagement politique (lors de la

guerre du Golfe, par exemple), de ceux qui voudraient le voir plaider en faveur de la condition de la femme ou de ceux qui ne tolèrent pas ses descriptions trop crues de la sexualité. Controversé, il éprouve bien des difficultés à faire reconnaître son territoire strictement littéraire. (Nys-Mazure, 56)

This insistence on a fictional space in which Ben Jelloun's writing resides is even more important to bear in mind when we consider how often the writer insists on this distinction in his works, as Nys-Mazure herself quotes him:

Tahar Ben Jelloun refuse de s'inféoder à un parti politique comme il refuse d'écrire des romans à thèse ; il affirme volontiers : *Notre seule identité est d'être écrivain, notre seul territoire est la littérature* et prête sa plume à tous ceux qui n'ont pas l'usage de la parole. (51)

In keeping with this emphasis on the fictional space, we see that even Ben Jelloun's approach to concrete issues, such as the methods of gaining power over the body, are tempered by the influence of literary philosophers like Borges. As such we can see that Ben Jelloun's interest lies in the delineation of ritual power in the fictional sense and in the fictional space, not, necessarily in the sociological sense. In the Borges quote which I examine next, it can be seen that it is essentially the dynamics of the telling of the tale which is the essence of the passage in Borges's text. In Ben Jelloun's integration of Borges as a character in the novel *L'Enfant de sable*, we are at first introduced to the character's technique of telling stories, in order to draw the parallel with the historical (apocryphal) Borges. The first few pages of the chapter "Le troubadour aveugle" include the following confessions from that character:

Sachez simplement que j'ai passé ma vie à falsifier ou altérer les histoires des autres... J'aime inventer mes souvenirs. Ça

dépend du visage de mon interlocuteur. ... J'écoute. Je tends l'oreille et j'apprends beaucoup de choses. C'est curieux comme l'oreille travaille. J'ai l'impression qu'elle nous renseigne plus et mieux sur l'état des choses. ... J'ai fréquenté beaucoup les poètes et les conteurs. J'amassais leurs livres, je les rangeais, je les protégeais. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 171-2)

Connection of the notions of ritual control of the body and power is a characteristic which Ben Jelloun's writing has in common with that of Borges, although in the latter's work the appearance of rituals as an actual narrative device is admittedly not common. The following reference, in a story by Borges, to the ancient ritual of cloak-and-dagger-style fighting happens to illustrate both the implication of the power struggle as well as, to a lesser extent, the position of the reader vis-à-vis the narrative:

Don Wenceslao agrees and, as soon as they take up their dueling again, he allows the other man to wound him on the left hand, in which he holds his rolled poncho. The knife slices through his wrist, the hand dangles loose. Surez, springing back, lays the bleeding hand on the ground, clamps it down under his boot, tears it off, feints a thrust at the amazed stranger's chest, then rips open his belly with a solid stab. So the story ends, except that, according to one teller, the man from Santa Fe is left lifeless, while to another (who withholds from him the dignity of death) he rides back to his own province. (Borges, "The Challenge," 142)²

We see that the reader is, even in the face of such an unbelievable event, compelled to choose between versions which differ only in their details, while the narrator takes this slight opportunity to comment on the supposed sentiments of the respective storytellers. In any case, the narrative

² See also the footnote on the same page concerning the ritual of cloak-and-dagger fighting.

seems to expound the seemingly supernatural power of the wounded man locked in a struggle to survive a deadly ancient ritual. Wenceslao, realizing his inferior strength, relies instead on his vulnerability to extract the advantage of shock. This demonstrates dramatically a subtle understanding of the relationship of the body to power which is evident in Ben Jelloun's work: the vulnerability of the body is also its strength. The body exerts psychological power/control over all those who possess a body themselves.

Conclusion

Ben Jelloun's fictional work is replete with examples of the confrontation of the individual with the communal, and his employment of rituals is no exception. By the mechanism of subversion, the author demonstrates how the power-enhancing qualities of ritual may be appropriated for individual use, and thus demonstrates the extent to which ritual's innate subversive qualities actually create this power structure. One example of the power of rituals is the way they can give the impression of control over universal forces, such as that of time—a theme which as we have seen, preoccupies Tahar Ben Jelloun greatly—and which we have examined here. It is evident that the attempt at collective revolt against such universal forces has a close analogy in the individual revolt against collective control mechanisms, of which these very same rituals form a part.

Part of the subversive quality which Ben Jelloun brings to the theme of ritual relies upon his exploration of the concept of non-meaning (which is treated at greater length in Chapter 2). By stressing the unpredictability of meanings which may be assigned to ritual acts and the inherent misunderstandings which they provoke, the author leaves the way open for a plethora of individual meanings, and in turn individualized rituals which generate infinitely more of these. This reflects his approach to the narrative, which insists on the multiplicity of possible stories and divagations which are not only possible, but necessarily implied by the act of narration

itself.

4. FREEDOM

This chapter aims to establish that the works of Tahar Ben Jelloun express a concern of the author's for freedom of expression, and for freedom generally. It will discuss how this concern can be detected in his works independently of the device of modification of rituals, but in such a way that light is shed on the use of this device. Occasionally, we shall also find that the two elements are more or less explicitly combined, so that it is possible to see whether any possible conclusions in this area are borne out. To illustrate this chapter I shall primarily have recourse to a close reading of the recent novel *La Nuit de l'erreur*, which turns primarily on the theme of freedom, as will be shown in the following discussion.

4.1 *Protagonists' quests for freedom*

In *La Nuit de l'erreur*, the characters Zina and Salim, among others, appear to be embarked on personal quests for freedom. In both of these cases their quests are linked to the characters' attempt to establish personal authenticity: put simply, they become aware of their separation from those around them. We notice a corresponding awareness of their own natures—the fact that they are themselves characters in a story, or, further, characters in a novel. It appears that the closer they come to guessing their natures such as we, the readers, perceive them, the greater they feel they have achieved their goal of freedom.

In contrast to these characters, we can compare the captivity or enslavement of those who instead pursue their desires for glory, sex, or power. (Zina herself must conduct a battle between a natural ability she possesses

which offers her power but seemingly at the price of freedom. The extent of her solution of this problem will also be discussed.)

Zina's and Salim's realization of their role in the story is related to the theme of free expression: their ability fearlessly to enunciate precisely what they experience allows them to comprehend their situation, and eventually to control it through creating their own fictions.

4.2 *Personal authenticity*

Zina's quest for freedom revolves around the consciousness of her difference from others, which is linked to her desire to live "authentically". Zina first enunciates the importance which she places on freedom in the presence of the Spanish man with whom she develops a strong mutual attraction (despite his admitted homosexuality). To him she declares, in unequivocal fashion:

Je tiens à la liberté autant qu'à la vie. Je ne respire que lorsque je suis libre, sans contraintes, sans obligations sociales ni familiales ... En cela je suis une étrangère. ... Même enfant, je ne me conduisais pas comme les autres enfants. Je n'avais pas les mêmes jeux, les mêmes rituels. (*La Nuit de l'erreur*, 46–7)

Thus her freedom is identified with her difference, and interestingly in the context of the present thesis, evoked in terms of her different "rituals". Her attraction to the Spaniard is likewise due to his foreignness, and his difference is also evident in his anarchistic politics and his homosexuality. In their ambiguous relationship we see the playing off of her freedom against his difference:

Il me dit que mon corps le troublait. ... En fait, ce qui le troublait, c'était la liberté dont jouissait mon corps. J'étais une rebelle et mon corps ne voilait ni ses atouts ni ses désirs. (50–1)

Zina's consciousness of her sexuality and of the freedom of her body is a development of her earlier realization that she was free of susceptibility to the tyranny of love, to which she observed others to be subject:

Et pourquoi n'éprouvais-je aucun sentiment d'amour ? Pourquoi
me jouais-je des autres sans jamais être atteinte à mon tour ?
(40)

When she offers herself sexually to her uncle's neighbour she is able to be straightforward in her demands simply because she feels no real desire. She is free of the all-consuming passion which, as we shall see, is the downfall of the assortment of men whose paths she crosses in the course of the novel:

C'était une excellent tactique : prendre les devants et nommer
les choses. Je pouvais le faire à partir du moment où je n'avais
pas de sentiments ni de vrai désir. (42)

There are echoes in this discourse of the importance of free speech also, of being free to "name things". Although she is initially devoid of desire this encounter marks an important step, elucidated in terms of a kind of freedom, the freedom from the disgust associated with reluctant participation in sexual activity: "Cela dura un bon moment, où j'eus pour la première fois de ma vie du plaisir sans dégoût, sans nausée" (42). This new acceptance of her own sexuality clearly translates into a freedom to fulfil the dictates or vicissitudes of her imagination without being subject to an external conception of propriety.

Zina is therefore entering a state of individual integrity, consistent only with her own world and self-conception. The freedom she feels and to which she is attracted is emphasized by the danger of discovery, which underlines her defiance of the prurient values of her society. When her lover arranges for them to meet in a bachelor flat instead of in the back of his shop for their encounters, she is therefore disgusted with him and

rejects him with extreme indifference. To further underscore her freedom and her separation from the society she mocks, she takes her revenge on him by apparently using her burgeoning magical powers to render him impotent.

Later Zina reasons through the paradox of the freedom for which she is searching, defining it as inextricably bound up with the consciousness of the emptiness which surrounds us, as she declares to an unfortunate lover:

« Écoute-moi, lui dit-elle. Est-il une chose plus vile que d'être satisfait de soi, dans une superbe vulgarité d'âme, et de forniquer en pensant au contenu d'une poubelle ? Sais-tu ... que nous sommes cernés par le vide, des gouffres où nous sommes tentés de nous jeter ? Mais cette tentation qui se veut notre ultime liberté est un leurre. ... » (134)

The emptiness she speaks of here is analogous to the emptiness which she becomes aware that she is carrying inside her near the opening of the novel, and which she strives to recapture by subsequently releasing the story to another narrator. Her current recognition of the deceptive nature of this freedom is due to her externalization of this symbol—it is the external, temporal suffering which the present narrator (Salim) presents as the source of her anguish, as we see in the continuation of the previous passage:

Car, comme en enfer, nous renaîtrons pour souffrir davantage, éternellement. C'est vrai que l'idée d'être maître de notre mort est perverse, parce qu'en fait, elle nous rend maître de notre vie, mais d'une vie qui n'en vaut pas la peine ... (134–5)

The freedom to control one's death contributes to a feeling of absurdity with regard to the value of life. This can be explained if we see this situation in terms of tension between the consciousness of the void suggested by the possibility of death and the sweetness this lends to a life lived authentically. While power over this death represents a kind of freedom, like all power

it also removes freedom, denying the drama of life versus the void. In the same way, lack of conscious desire denied Zina the possibility of love while nevertheless enabling her to fulfil her sensual impulses.

The angry, defiant tone evidenced in this passage is eventually translated into a compulsion to harm others in the name of one's own freedom. When Zina resumes the narrative in the chapter "Bilal" we are provided with an insight into her interpretation of freedom, which explicitly embodies the freedom to do evil, which she seems to regard as almost a moral duty rather than merely a right or inevitability. Her words echo Houda's in the previous chapter, who declares: "Au moins, là, nous sommes libres de faire mal !" (164).

Je me pose des questions parce que je n'ai pas confiance en Jamila. Elle est mauvaise parce qu'elle est aigrie. Je n'aime pas ce genre de méchanceté. J'aurais voulu qu'elle fût mauvaise dans l'absolu, au point d'incarner le Mal. J'ai toujours pensé que ceux qui font le mal vivent longtemps. (171)

For Zina, Jamila is bad because she has allowed herself to become so, not because she has actively sought to be so. She is therefore not free in the sense that she is not that which she desires to be, whether that be good or evil.

Salim as narrator offers a new angle on Zina's philosophical outlook, as she confronts Abid during her tumultuous relationship with him, answering his tentative questions about her past. Zina evokes her profound intolerance for what comes across as an inauthentic way of living. Her explanation is brought on by the catalyst of Abid becoming distracted by the bin full of recently smashed crockery, while they are making love in the kitchen, in a quotation we have already looked at ("Est-il une chose plus vile que d'être satisfait de soi ..." (134)). In the following tirade on the merits or otherwise of mastering one's own death (134–5), she makes what appears to be an existentialist apology for her madness, as well as

condemning Abid's complacency. Her authenticity forces her to confront her awareness of the terrible consequences which her freedom brings and the godlike responsibility of knowing the limits of that freedom, without anyone having told her of them. And she reacts with the intolerance of a god to the spectacle of others' overestimation of their relative importance:

Ma violence est ma façon naturelle d'être. ... si on me ment, si on tente de me réduire à de l'insignifiance, alors, comme une bête, je fonce et je fais mal. Je sais, je porte sur la vie des jugements cruels et sans nuance. (135)

As Abid understands later, she has become an "hérétique de l'existence", because she is "débarrassée de toute illusion" (140). In other words, her very authenticity and freedom make her an outcast. She effectively places herself outside of humanity. When the lovers meet again at her request twenty years later, Abid notices that neither her face nor her body has altered over that time. He thinks to himself: "Cette femme n'est pas de ce monde" (148). She has apparently freed herself of human suffering, including the effects of aging, and this freedom has led her to a new understanding of the course of her life. Reacting to Abid's thanking of God and fortune for that encounter, she retorts:

—Ne mêle pas le ciel à ton obscénité ! Quant au hasard, c'est une vieille histoire qui traverse nos vies à notre insu, pendant qu'on s'imagine que nous maîtrisons ce qui nous arrive ou ce que nous provoquons. (149)

Her striving for freedom and her growing awareness of the difficulty of that struggle combine to give us an impression of her power and to some extent her wisdom. In her strength to confront the impossibility of control over one's life she succeeds in giving the impression of authority, if not quite convincing us that she will succeed in her struggle.

The concept of androgyny is also evoked in the novel *La Nuit de l'erreur* in relation to freedom. Zina's concept of freedom is linked with androgyny as a manifestation of difference, and one which actually examines the theme of difference directly, as we can see in the following passage:

Je n'étais pas tout à fait féminine. J'aspirais à être un homme aux apparences d'une femme ... J'inversais les rapports. (45)

In this context the relationship with the Spaniard, who later admits to her that he is gay, is a further confusion of expectations which allows her to establish her own freedom against the grain of social propriety. Their relationship is neither sordid nor entirely Platonic; the two seem to strive to differentiate themselves from what they recognize in others and manage to avoid caricature of any sort.

4.3 Characters' self-awareness

Early in the novel Zina, as the narrator, shows a remarkable degree of awareness of her position in the context of the novel, explicitly altering the narrative structure of the work in a way which has implications for the reader's impression of Zina's freedom. At about the point where she confessedly has gained enough experience to pass from being "atteinte d'absence" (83) and moved to being (metaphorically) a story, ("[être] devenue une histoire" (83)) she begins the process of consigning her story to another narrator. This is the one-armed "Tarzan" (later known by his real name, Dahmane) whom she invents, or rather dreams into existence, and to whom she transmits her stories for him to tell as he travels around the country.

Il ne pensait plus qu'à moi et aux histoires que je lui faisais parvenir pour qu'il les rendît publiques. Il continuait de recevoir des cahiers d'écolier où des éléments pour construire une histoire étaient consignés. Cette confiance que je lui manifestais le rendait fier. (93)

The power, and consequently the freedom, of Ben Jelloun's characters seem to increase to the extent that they are aware of their involvement in a story, and the closer they approach the reader's understanding of what they are (although this power proves to be problematic). Just as Zina liberates herself by delegating her narrative to Dahmane, during her relationship with Bilal she frees herself by expressing her desire entirely through his pleasure, vicariously but in absolute control of that pleasure and in meticulous observation of it (180). Here is reflected the vicarious experience of the writer through his work, and of the narrator through her characters. Zina has moved from awareness of herself as a character to the realization that she may control her story by invention in her turn.

In Zina's relationships with the male characters in *La Nuit de l'erreur* we see a progression of degrees of self-awareness displayed by them, which is reflected by the progression of her own self-awareness. Bilal's account of his relationship with Zina places much emphasis on her dominance in their encounters and on her taking of the initiative in every facet of their lovemaking. This is explicitly explained in terms of her pursuit of freedom: "Elle me disait que toutes ces positions étaient l'expression d'une belle liberté et que c'était dans l'amour qu'elle se libérait" (175).

Bilal describes the degeneration of his relationship with Zina in terms of Zina's supposed "theft" of his feelings, but this can be seen as an effort by her to further push the boundaries of her freedom, by first establishing the limits of her desires. Bilal says:

... cette femme ne me donne rien, elle me prend mes sensations, elle me prend mon plaisir, elle ne partage rien avec moi. Cela paraît paradoxal, mais sur le moment, j'étais convaincu que j'étais en face d'une voleuse. ... Elle me réduisait à un laboratoire de sa volonté. (180)

Although, from Bilal's point of view, he is the victim, Zina is as much, if not more, the subject (literally, the object) of her own experiments. She is

exploring the extent to which her freedom depends upon the participation and the pleasure of another. Just as she liberated herself by delegating her narrative to Dahmane, with Bilal she frees herself by the expression of her desire through effecting his pleasure, in vicarious but absolute control of that pleasure and meticulous observation of it.

When it becomes apparent that Salim is a would-be writer we see the end of a pattern in the progression of male characters in the story. Speaking of his quest to find Zina again years after their relationship, the narrator says: "C'était son désir inavoué, son rêve secret : écrire au lieu de devoir vivre" (224). This quotation imitates the attitude of Tahar Ben Jelloun as author. If Salim is a reflection of the author himself then the pattern of male characters whose lives have been overturned by Zina can be examined: beginning with the malicious and ignorant with which she becomes intimately but tragically connected (Bilal), to one who learns of his place in the story through another character (Bacher), to the self-aware with whom she has no contact but who seeks her out (Salim). Zina's path towards freedom, in terms of the progress of the story, begins to attract those for whom true freedom, and not just for oneself, is an essential quality. As Salim's partner Fatéma quotes him:

Ils me font rire, ceux qui pensent que la femme marocaine est soumise, résignée, dominée et sans liberté ! ... Je me suis arrêté devant toi parce que j'ai vu tout de suite que tu étais une femme libre, exigeante et déterminée à ne rien laisser passer ou pardonner ! (232)

Although he is speaking of Fatéma, these are also the characteristics which engender his later obsession with Zina.

In Ben Jelloun's work we observe the distinct unease of those elements (characters, narrators) when they become aware of the control which the story has over them. Bilal's sudden awareness of Zina's motivations is analogous to other characters' awareness that they are part of a story (cf. characters in *La Prière de l'absent*). This awareness leads to an evolution in the

self-consciousness of this character too, except that the evolution is represented by his role being taken up by a different but similar character. Indeed, when Bachar appears to take the place of Bilal as the object of Zina's scorn and revenge, he reaches the point of realizing he is becoming part of a story when the women take him to Hercules' Caves: "Une voix intérieure lui répondit: Effectivement, tu viens d'entrer dans une histoire" (197). This impression is explained to him later by the night-watchman, who attributes his "vision" of the five women as a symptom of his having entered a very particular story:

—Elles étaient cinq, tu dis ? Je vois... Tu as été embarqué dans l'histoire de la Main magique, où chaque doigt est une branche qui veille sur les contes qu'on se raconte pour passer le temps ! C'est une main géante qui règne sur les histoires. Elle est elle-même une immense histoire que les femmes se racontent parfois pour conjurer le sort et repousser les malédictions. (199)

The limits of Bachar's insight are shown by the fact that he has to have his place in a story explained to him by another. When his role as protagonist is taken over by Salim we see that he comes to the same conclusion of his own accord, but he merely alludes to his realization at first: "Qui se serait glissé dans ses nuits [à Zina] pour lui assurer ce pouvoir ?" (223). This question gives the impression of a character distantly aware of authorial presence, but in ironic fashion he does not speak of it directly. A few sentences later he says something which seems to belie his knowledge: "Comme par hasard, c'est dans le désastre du monde que je me retrouve ..." (223). In the nature of a non sequitur, this statement suggests the identification with the author himself. Zina seems to have made the character of Salim into a vehicle for the self-searching of the author, of whose presence she is not only aware but whom she is calling to account with this "Qui se serait glissé dans ses nuits ... ?"

Upon the subsequent discovery of the loveless existences of his friends, Salim demonstrates his self-consciousness as a character by resolving to

leave the story of his own accord. He decides he would be more appropriate as a character in *The Thousand and One Nights* or in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, even going to the point of quoting from this last work (293–4). A further development confirms Salim's identification with the implied author. He is driven to address a letter to Salman Rushdie, transcribing it onto the back page of a copy of this book. This, too, turns out to be an essay on the nature and the price of freedom, more particularly, on freedom of expression (295). The device of having Salim write what is essentially a missive from Tahar Ben Jelloun to Salman Rushdie in the back of a copy of the English writer's book, as a kind of appendix to his work, demonstrates Salim's self-awareness as a character in the book. After all, there is no likelihood of Rushdie ever reading this particular (French) copy of the book, even in the context of Ben Jelloun's work, but Salim decides that it is more useful to put it there than to entrust it to the censored mails. The only way this makes sense is if its inclusion in *La Nuit de l'erreur* may bring it to Rushdie's notice upon its publication (which it may well have done), and if Salim is aware of this possibility.

This device also illustrates a kind of small triumph of communication by means of art over censorship, demonstrating the subversive power of literature through its ability to convey messages interpolated in the body of the text. This supposed communication from one author to another must after all be inferred by the reader, and it is far from the only possible interpretation, making it in this sense a hidden meaning, to which those sympathetic to the message are inherently more receptive.

Salim finally frees himself from the power Zina has over him with the ultimate condemnation of his love for her, combined with frank realization of its context: "Avec Fatéma, ce n'était pas l'amour. Avec Zina, c'était du roman" (308). With this he draws a symbolic curtain on the story, thinking whimsically about travelling the world. His half-ironic realization that he has been part of a novel, and not merely a story, imbues him with the maximum amount of freedom we encounter in a character of Ben Jelloun's.

Just as religious investigation usually is posited in terms of a search for one's true nature in order to achieve some kind of liberation, so the character's understanding of his place in a novel frees him from the drama which encumbers him.

4.4 *Achieving freedom*

The other characters in the work all arrive at definable degrees of success or failure in their quests for freedom. Houda's liberation is of an unusual sort but nonetheless seems unassailable. She allows her child liberator to become a part of her secret life (243). The sharing of secrets is a powerful connecting force in Ben Jelloun's writing. It represents a method of mutual submission to the trust of the other. The secret per se is also the basis for the story, a kind of dramatic fulcrum, the mention of which binds the characters to the pursuit of their story. In this example, the young man gains knowledge of Houda's secrets, while becoming dependent upon her as the narrator of his story. So Houda finally participates in a mutual relinquishing of freedom with an ephemeral, fantasy figure; in other words, she obtains to a make-believe captivity, and is, in the physical sense, finally free.

Salim's rediscovery of his old friend at the café after his search for Zina occasions the examination of their methods of liberating themselves from the influence of Zina in comparison to his own. Although Salim has been struck by the depth of his own naïvety up to that point, he does not subsequently become cynical, as is the case with his friends. He is not defeated, because his quest began as a quest for freedom, while theirs began as one for the fulfilment of their desires. The necessity for freedom is forced upon them nevertheless, and this manifests itself in a cultivation of the obsession with loss. This is shown in a rather conceptual vein, but we can see that a vital element is missing or denied in the short description of their current lives: Bachar denies the earth is round, Abid buys a horse and removes one

eye from it to correspond to a subject of his painting, Bilal counts the time which he “loses”, burns his collection of postcards and sets his collection of cinema film adrift, Carlos stops talking but spits constantly. Clearly they are all attempting to free themselves of something, but as they are not sure what causes this urge, it expresses itself in symbolic rather than practical fashion.

Zina’s freedom from the authority of her parents upon their death is the most vivid and tactile in its effect on the reader. It occurs when Zina reclaims the narrative after the abrupt end of Salim’s story. She speaks of the death of her parents as a liberating experience—not a pleasant one, however, but a difficult process accompanied by bodily purging and family recriminations.

Je me suis dit : « Si je vois mon image, c’est qu’ils sont morts. »
Je voyais quelque chose de flou. Je n’étais pas encore libérée. Je savais qu’avec leur mort une partie de la bile noire que je porte en moi allait se déverser et me rendre un peu plus humaine ...

Je regardais les deux corps côte à côte, enveloppés dans le linceul blanc. Je ne ressentais rien. ...

Dès que je fus dans la rue, je m’appuyais contre le mur et vomis de la bile, d’abord verdâtre, ensuite noire. Un chat s’approcha de moi et lapa de ce liquide. Il prit la fuite en miaulant de toutes ses forces, puis mourut sur-le-champ. (238–9)

All the emotional catharsis of Zina’s release from the domination of her parents is expressed in bodily terms. But this progression of Zina’s poisonous nature from a metaphor for her effect on the lives of men to its expression of her as a literal container of poisonous bile is concurrent with a further development in her quest for freedom. The incorporation of her psychological characteristics is a facilitating stage whereby she may physically free herself from the self-destructive aspects of her essentially destructive nature.

For other characters, freedom can only be achieved at a far higher price:

through their own death. But in the case of Zina's uncle, this is painted in rather pleasant colours by the author, and she is given the status of heroine for her part in it. In this remembered episode, where Zina takes poison to her uncle, who is sick and in great pain, the narrative also emphasizes the concept of freedom. The narrator introduces the episode as "[le] temps où je portais bonheur à mon oncle" (79), in a twin reference to his happiness at her visit and the pill which she fetches him from the doctor. For her uncle, death is not something to fear, but something which he identifies closely with one of his favourite things, something which also represents freedom in the popular imagination: the sea.¹

La mort, ce n'est rien. L'important, c'est ce voile bleu qui monte de l'horizon et qui arrive lentement jusqu'à couvrir les pieds, puis les jambes, puis la poitrine. ... Pendant des années, chaque fois que je pensais à la mort, je le voyais. Peut-être parce que j'ai toujours adoré regarder la mer ... (80)

As death represents freedom for Zina's uncle, so he chooses it freely when the captivity of his earthly pain becomes too much to bear. In becoming the vessel for her uncle's freedom, Zina is confronted by the suspicions of her uncle's family, who, although unaware of her role in her uncle's death, accuse her of bringing bad luck with her visit (81), while the uncle himself called her his "porte-bonheur" (80) echoing her recollection of the event. We are presented with a classic opposition between a seeker of freedom and the collective will to hold freedom back, for selfish reasons or superstitious ones.

¹ The sea is also used to symbolize freedom in *La Nuit sacrée*, when, immediately upon being released from prison, Zahra narrates: "J'avais une terrible envie de voir la mer, d'en sentir le parfum, d'en voir la couleur, d'en toucher l'écume" (*La Nuit sacrée*, 186).

4.5 Pursuit of desires, captivity

If we examine the description of Tangier given by the narrator whom Zina has apparently dreamed into existence (Dahmane), we are confronted by a city which enjoys a curious type of freedom, which is in some way analogous to Zina's. First of all, the city is (jokingly) referred to as a "ville hermaphrodite" (97), welcoming travellers as a lover (of either sex) or as a mother. It therefore enjoys the freedom which Zina seeks when she refuses to be entirely feminine (45). We are told that girls from respectable families "brisaient les miroirs des temps anciens, accumulant les aventures rocambolesques" (97), and seem to entirely dominate the men with whom they engage in these affairs. Also in this regard the city is a symbol of the freedom Zina seeks for herself, as it too allows itself the liberties of invention and fabulation in which Zina indulges, to the point where a curse over the city is attributed to her, even though the citizens doubt its reality and the reality of Zina's existence:

Il leur arrivait, chacun à part, de douter, jusqu'à se demander s'ils n'étaient pas devenus tous fous, s'ils n'avaient pas inventé cette histoire juste pour passer le temps, pour s'amuser et mettre à l'épreuve leur capacité d'imaginer et de se faire peur. (97-8)

Zina's abandonment of Tangier seems to be a reaction to its disintegration into a city displaying all the symptoms of forced servitude. Drug dealers have taken over the north, bribing and having sex with women who are "certes consentantes mais le dégoût au bout des lèvres" (111). The beach is piled high with the tourists' rubbish, the central city has been overtaken by new buildings which remain empty. The narrator comments: "Tanger nous quittait et on ne le savait pas" (111). The city's misfortunes even extend to "viols en plein jour" (111) about which the people try not to show their concern: "La passion s'en détournait et les cafés se remplissaient de gens qui regardaient le temps passer ..." (111). The people are helpless,

overcome by their languor and by the consciousness of their own recklessness. Zina, in her search for freedom, rejects the city's new malady and she abandons it.

The story which Houda tells to Zina is a succession of submissions and liberations. A demonstratively obscene and unruly young woman, she is confined by her parents to a hermitage, from where she is freed by a man known as the "Chevalier des vertus", to whom she willingly submits in return:

J'avoue à ma grande honte que je trouvais du plaisir à être son objet consentant et résigné. ... Je faisais le ménage, je lui préparais à manger. (280-1)

How is it that one so eager for liberation gives up her freedom to the first person to offer her a taste of it? The paradox of having the freedom to give up one's very liberty is a device which recurs regularly in *La Nuit de l'erreur*. The relinquishing of one's liberty is not shown to be entirely futile, however, for it is by this method that the subject learns the nature of the one to whom she has submitted—it is not long before a man to whom nothing is forbidden reveals his true nature.

« Je compris vite à quel type d'individu j'avais affaire. Le "Chevalier des vertus" devint "l'Hypocrite". ... Après avoir confondu l'Hypocrite, je me sentais plus libre. Je savais que tout le village était de son côté. ... » (241)

After mischievously calling the people of the hermitage to prayer at the wrong time, she is once more locked away, this time explicitly in the captivity of the hypocrite *fqih*, where she seems to be more at home with the mice and rats in the cellar than she was in the company of the hypocrite, despite her avowed fear of rats. In the cellar she experiences a double liberation. In a waking dream she is freed by the schoolchildren who condemn the *fqih*. This dream turns out to be a portent since later she is in fact

rescued by a group of children, one of whom claims in his turn to be her “chevalier”, and whom she resolves to wait for:

Il me dit : “ Je suis ton chevalier. . . .” Je lui promis de l’attendre.
Cet ange fait partie de mes secrets. . . . Ce sera mon enfant, mon
homme. Je sais que je serais son histoire. (243)

Thus she is freed twice, and on both occasions she looks for a figurehead to whom she might relinquish her newly gained freedom. Houda’s story asks how much it is possible to express gratitude for liberation while still retaining it. The one positive development in transferring her submission from the hypocrite to this small boy is that the second object of her submission is more or less a fantasy. Not being present he is manifested as a mere fictional construct in Houda’s mind, over which she therefore has control. Her inclusion of him as one of her “secrets” defines him as a piece of her story, the conscious makeup of her psyche; her prediction that she will be that for him, speculatively projected into the future, represents the beginning of Houda’s creation of her own story.

On the other hand, those who tell stories seem to be risking the same kind of captivity. It seems as if traffic in words is regarded as the pursuit of an illegitimate desire also. In Ben Jelloun’s scheme of things, the tellers of stories seem to be under a misapprehension about their nature, as we see during their debates in captivity. Dahmane and Jamila are imprisoned by the authorities, and are left to decipher the reasons for themselves. The actor Lamarty suggests that the storytellers are really thieves and revolutionaries: “. . . nous sommes des trafiquants . . . des bandits qui répandons la parole folle, qui semons les herbes et la discorde . . .” (312). Dahmane agrees but is still optimistic about the power of words to liberate them:

. . . nous trafiquons des métaphores qui donnent à rêver . . .
Les gens nous croient et nous leur mentons pour leur faire plaisir . . .

— Et qu’allons-nous leur répondre, s’ils nous interrogent ?

— Nous leur répondrons en leur racontant des histoires ...
Et nous quitterons cette cave sur les rayons de rêves qui auront
pénétré là par la grâce des mots et des images. (312–3)

Is Dahmane deluded? Are the storytellers mistaken about the extent of their power, and therefore the extent of their freedom? Perhaps this final wish is an example of one of the very metaphors which produce dreams in the listener, of which Dahmane speaks. Perhaps the storytellers have finished by believing their own lies. Only the character who realizes his own subordination, like Salim, and ceases to try to create anything obtains freedom—an idea perhaps derived from Sufi philosophy.

There is also paradox in the manner in which Zina's pursuit of sexual liberation leads to an episode of captivity. Zina's experience is reflected in the destinies of several of the men whom she meets later on in the novel, who are motivated almost entirely by sexual desire. In this episode, though, Zina is merely following the lead of a woman named Angela whom she has befriended. This Australian woman defines her annual ritual of participation in an orgy with a group of Moroccan boys as "une cérémonie où tout est possible, à condition que rien ne sorte de ce lieu" (64). She speaks about the freedom necessary to the body:

Le corps a besoin de se défouler et surtout de vivre sans penser,
sans sentir le regard de la famille ou de la société se poser sur
lui. J'adore me laisser aller à toutes les libertés. (64)

Zina instead experiences these very liberties as a kind of captivity. She remembers merely submitting to the desires of the drunk and drugged boys and eventually being knocked unconscious by one of them. She wakes miserable in the stinking room, and wanders home contemplating the audacity of the boys who used her:

Pourquoi ces garçons avaient-ils cru que tout était possible en
cette longue nuit qu'ils appelaient Nuit de l'Oubli et s'étaient-ils

volontairement transformés en monstres, par jeu ou par folie ?
(68)

4.6 *Power at the price of freedom*

The fact that Zina seems to be free from the effects of love in her relations with men is eventually experienced as a limitation, however, and here we see the first trade-off between power and freedom in Zina's psyche.

Je lisais des livres, je voyais des films et je ne comprenais pas pourquoi j'étais exclue de cette fièvre qui rend si faible. Justement l'idée d'être faible m'était insupportable. (45)

Zina feels initially that her freedom depends upon her knowledge and her strength, but according to this structure she does not have the power to make herself entirely free, since the experience of the sensation of "falling in love" relies upon weakness and to some extent ignorance. Paradoxically, she is not free to fall in love, for this requires a kind of enslavement to a stronger power. When she does eventually fall in love with the Spanish man, it is on the occasion of the display of a rather symbolic weakness on her part—she slips in the street and the Spaniard helps her to her feet—but on this occasion a small crack in her demeanour suffices for her to experience the slight feeling of helplessness which she imagines is necessary to allow love to happen. Early in the novel Zina is told explicitly about the mysterious power which she has guessed that she possesses from an early age. A gypsy woman reads her palm:

Elle m'apprit que j'étais aussi bien douée pour provoquer le malheur que le bonheur. Elle me le démontra en faisant osciller une pendule sur des cartes. (39)

This circumstance betrays a curious mixture of the themes of freedom and predetermination. Zina's freedom and her power seem to be expressed

in her power to do evil, but this is revealed through mysterious means over which she can have no influence. Nevertheless, at their next meeting Zina threatens the gypsy woman, who runs off, which both bears out the gypsy's testimony (Zina is a match for her power) and demonstrates that her revelation that Zina is a magical being gives her no control over her.

During her affair with her father's neighbour her exploration of her freedom is inextricably linked with her new-found power and with the concept of power in general. The man's inherent powerlessness is illustrated by his insistence on the secret location of their rendezvous, and this suggests to Zina the idea of his impotence, which she then forces upon him literally, apparently through some sort of psychic influence. Her magical talents are in a sense a type of storytelling: she invents situations based on her intellectual conceptualizations of them. But we have seen that this implies that she is not able to create powerlessness in herself, such as is necessary in order to experience falling in love. This identification, which Zina creates, of freedom with power, is analogous to the notion of free speech and the compulsion of testimony—that what can be said must be said even if it means destroying concepts only allowed by naïvety. (“Nescit vox missa reverti”; “A word once said is irrevocable.” (Quoted in (De Quincey, 72).) Her fear of being weak reflects her fear of ignorance and her fear of not being able to express what she desires.

At the *moussem* it is during a moment of helplessness that she again feels real desire for a man, but when she is conscious and aware while with him, her power makes this feeling of love untenable. It is during her epileptic fit while dancing that Moulay Abdesslam picks her up in his arms. . .

Je me sentais sauvée, prête à me donner à cet homme qui avait
su sortir de moi ce que je portais de mauvais et de trouble dans
mon âme. (*La Nuit de l'erreur*, 59)

But it is only this moment of unconsciousness which provides her with the opportunity to be free to “give herself”. When the actual opportunity

arises, her awareness paradoxically allows her “demons” to overtake her almost against her will:

Je n’étais pas tout à fait inconsciente et je sentais monter en moi non pas le désir mais mes démons, ceux qui cassaient tout, gâchaient tout et me transformaient en vipère. Je me laissais faire. (60)

During Zina’s experience with the Australian woman Angela she feels entirely helpless, but in a way which implies a deliberate deprivation of her power by a stronger force. Here Zina experiences the abuse of others’ power, and although her helplessness does not allow her to experience feelings which she seeks as it did previously, she purposefully makes the experience a strengthening one. She does this in a tactile and sensory manipulation involving the self-consciousness of her body, by the simple expedient of depriving herself of a bath for several days after the episode of the drugged orgy, because, as she explains, “Il fallait apprendre le dégoût pour qu’il n’y ait jamais d’oubli ou de pardon” (69–70). Clearly her freedom depends on the strength and knowledge to recognize and defeat her enemies. When she has finally washed away the physical reminders of the experience at the *hammam*, she declares herself with new strength:

Je ne regardais plus le monde avec stupeur. J’avais vieilli d’un coup et j’avais plus d’expérience que toutes les autres filles de mon âge. . . . Je me sentais purifiée et je pouvais déchirer toutes les voiles et agir avec une détermination froide. (69-70)

Zina’s freedom also seems to rely on the absence of the burden of her own story. In other words, her freedom relies on her very existence as a fictional character. Too much power, or semblance of power, implied by her role as narrator, would seem to work against the cause of her liberation. Once this process of transferral of her narrative role is achieved, however, she goes on telling the story for a short passage, as if to demonstrate the

narrative “liberties” which she may permit herself now that she is no longer burdened by the actual responsibility for her own story:

J'avais besoin de disparaître et d'assister sans être vue au spectacle de la déchéance de ceux qui avaient jeté ma vie en lambeaux au fond d'un puits où des taupes mortes étaient ressuscitées pour enténébrer mon âme et la déchiquter dans un festin où j'étais réduite à une araignée qui faisait peur aux enfants. J'exagère ! J'aime bien exagérer ! (93)

Zina's relinquishing of her control over the narrative shows up another trade-off of power for freedom, as Zina has cause to criticize the development of the characters she has initially created. We have seen (on page 73) how Jamila incurs her disapproval because her evil nature is not wholly wished for and deliberate (171). One would assume that Zina would have been capable of creating Jamila as evil as was her fancy, but the powers of the narrator in her case seem to extend only over the creation of the characters, and not over their entire development. Since it is her characters who are in part responsible for telling Zina's own story, this inevitably places some limits on Zina's freedom also. Zina alludes to this balance by politely expressing the hope that her characters will tell her story according to the books which she has given to Dahmane for this purpose: “Pour la suite, j'espère que Dahmane se contentera de lire le cahier bleu, celui où je raconte la fin de Bilal ...” (171).

This trade-off of power for freedom is also expressed sexually during her relationship with Bilal, as she forsakes the open expression of her own pleasure in order to gain control over both Bilal himself and her own impulses: the fact of power is the enabling force of the freedom she seeks. Bilal gradually realizes that the manner of their encounters leaves him absolutely helpless in the face of her whims, and that she limits her own participation in order to maintain that control. She forsakes intercourse with him in order to experience his orgasms as a detached observer, and

conceals her own orgasms, according to Bilal's account anyway. Thus Bilal receives the impression that Zina is stealing his sensations ("cette femme ne me donne rien ..." (180)).

Salim's quest for liberation, in the form of freedom from the ghosts of his past, begins to show its naïve foundations as he analyses his final encounter with Zina (by then known as Chérifa) and with Houda. It is at this point that we discover a different limitation on the possibility of freedom, separate from others' abuse of their own freedom: mystification. Here, despite his lack of belief in magic and witchcraft, Salim is compelled to consider the characteristics of Zina's inexplicable power over him and her legendary power over others.

Dans sa naïveté originelle, dans sa bonté irrationnelle, il refusait de croire que Zina peut être mêlée à ces histoires de sorcellerie, de transe et de folie. Ce monde dont il soupçonnait l'existence lui faisait peur. ... Lui, l'homme du bon sens, l'intellectuel, le militant, ne pouvait laisser sa raison se dissoudre dans un verre d'eau mélangée avec de la poudre. (290)

The characteristics of magic exclude the possibility of an outsider understanding, let alone participating in, its world, despite the apparent effects magic has on the outsider's own world. Coming up against this realization makes Salim's quest for freedom appear naïve to him, and he virtually gives up in hopelessness. But the realization of his naïvety up to this point makes him aware of his companions' cynicism, and this frees him from his own naïvety. Speaking of his old friends from the café, he says:

Apparemment, ils n'avaient plus de secrets les uns pour les autres. Ils étaient transparents et ce qu'ils se montraient était sans grand intérêt, disons qu'il n'existe pas de mots simples pour le nommer. (290)

4.7 Free expression

Freedom is very commonly considered to grow out of the precondition of free expression, and for a writer we would expect no different an approach to the question. It is, however, remarkable the extent to which Ben Jelloun equates these two ideas—freedom does not merely rely upon free expression, but expression itself is freedom, or as Colette Nys-Mazure puts it more precisely, partially citing the author:

Un grand poète de ce temps, sans conteste, convaincu que le désespoir peut être actif et que *seule la poésie, c'est-à-dire la liberté absolue peut agir*. (Nys-Mazure, 66)

In this phrase, which is itself a play involving reversal of our expectations of causal logic, poetry both represents a realm of absolute freedom, and provides tangible freedom through its capacity to create, that is to generate an original action, instead of merely reacting. This theme is elaborated further in *La Nuit de l'erreur*.

The episode of Houda's confinement by the "Hypocrite" shows that for Ben Jelloun's characters freedom does not only consist in the absence of captivity, but in the defiance of those who would imprison or control a person when the power to do so is in their hands (recall Houda's words: "Après avoir confondu l'Hypocrite, je me sentais plus libre" (241)). Houda's awareness of her freedom leads to her perversion of the Muslim ritual of the call to prayer. This kind of distortion of ritual is by now familiar to us in Ben Jelloun's writing, and here we see it explicitly used as a device illustrating the protagonist's consciousness of freedom.

« Un jour, alors que tout le monde faisait la sieste, je montai au minaret, branchai le micro et me mis à appeler les gens à la prière. Ce n'était l'heure d'aucune prière. ... Je pris un grand plaisir à faire appel hors norme. ... » (241)

The story of the suicide victim whose funeral procession Salim meets is one of a great striving for freedom of expression. He battles to free himself from even the rather passively manifesting control which religion has over people. According to the man who is pulling the funeral cart: “Cet homme est devenu fou à force de douter et de proclamer sa haine de la religion et des religieux” (261).

The man has his body ceremoniously prepared for burial while still alive, and ends up by suffocating in the shroud. We see that this man manifestly demonstrates the phenomenon of overcompensation in his drive for liberty, demonstrating his freedom to the extreme extent available to him, forgetting even all concept of the sanctity of the self in his desire to lampoon that which he seems to feel is dominating him. In this he succeeds marvellously, demonstrating the true limits of freedom, and his demonstration is no less valid because he also teaches its cost.

It turns out that the dead man’s love for freedom has come up against the manifest corruption of Morocco’s public institutions, continuing the theme treated at length in *L’Homme rompu*. The dead man’s treatment of the corruption he encounters is in a tone of highest ridicule and sounds almost like a call to arms:

... Les corrupteurs et les corrompus se donnent la main, bavent devant les adolescents sans défense, boivent jusqu’à l’ivresse et rotent en posant une main sur leur ventre ... je n’ai pas pu me retenir de vomir à leur passage. ... Mais ma morale n’a rien à voir avec la leur. La mienne est de la dynamite. (263–4)

So the dead man’s pursuit of freedom is seen as a response to the excessive liberties taken by Morocco’s privileged élite, liberties which manifested themselves not only in the oppression of the poor but also in an explicit aesthetic ugliness; these people are in fact ugly in their excessive freedom. They are not satisfied with being able to “respirer de manière naturelle et sereine” (262), as the dead man expresses his own goal. It is they who

prevent the dead man and others from doing so. In the same vein Salim, considering what he has read in the dead man's diary, wonders about the seeming inevitability of committing evil if, having been forgotten by social forces, one simply has the freedom to seek love.

Il s'en voulait de s'être laissé prendre par l'amour. Comment était-il possible qu'à travers l'amour le mal puisse circuler et s'imposer à un homme cultivé et bien intentionné ? (266)

Salim reads the expression of the suicided man's drive for liberty in the book written by him which the cart-puller gives to Salim. In keeping with his role as guardian of the status quo—a keeper of the rules (“Le suicide est interdit” (260))—the cart-puller gives Salim the book on condition that Salim doesn't reveal to him what it contains, as if he is afraid of being affected by the dangerous concepts of freedom which the dead man might have collected there. And indeed the dead man's book seems to have a revolutionary and dangerous tone:

« ... Je ne suis pas philosophe, mais j'ai décidé d'aller jusqu'au bout de ce qui m'empêche de respirer de manière naturelle et sereine. La sincérité est ma morale. Le rire est mon âme. Pour échapper au pendule de la vie, qui oscille entre le mensonge et l'ennui, je me soustrais volontairement de la compétition. Ma mort aurait été ma dernière liberté, peut-être l'unique liberté.

« ... J'ai essayé d'enseigner à des adolescents l'amour du droit et de la liberté. ... Je suis irrécupérable, définitivement allergique à l'hypocrisie érigée en règle de conduite, allergique au mensonge, au vol arrangé. ... » (263)

This revolutionary aspect of free speech is touched upon in Salim's handwritten postface to Rushdie's novel:

Je ne savais pas que l'offense pouvait venir de la plus grande fantaisie, que l'imaginaire le plus libre produisait le blasphème et que le tout aboutirait à la sentence de mort. ... Comment faire prévaloir la liberté de création sur le cynisme politique? (295)

Salim goes further in his letter, passionately railing against self-censorship to the point where he approaches ever closer to the reader's perception of the implied author's voice, and this implied author is recognized exactly by our knowledge of the actual public personage of Tahar Ben Jelloun, by his beliefs both explicit and demonstrated through his works.

« Aujourd'hui nous sommes soumis à une censure qui a pris ses aises à l'intérieur de nos esprits, une menace de mort avec des images de corps déchiquetés, des visages vitriolés, des consciences violées, des mains coupées et des mots réfractaires, des mots rebelles écrits par une encre mêlée de sang. Sang humain, sang rare, sang de nos peurs et de nos arrangements. Avez-vous remarqué combien nos plumes ralentissent quand nous écrivons? Elles ne glissent plus sur la feuille mais raclent le fond de nos dictionnaires pour trouver le mot qui couvrira de son apparence anodine une pensée dangereuse. ... » (296)

By consciously withdrawing himself from the story Salim assumes the authority of the author's voice, and we effectively have an appeal from Ben Jelloun to Rushdie, writers communicating by means of their works, in a situation where censorship and oppression have made it impossible for them to meet face to face. Paradoxically, the images which Salim says threaten writers into submission are themselves products of the free expression of witnesses, so the cynicism described here is in some sense shown to be self-produced as well as self-perpetuating.

Salim's exposition of his ideas on censorship continues by evoking respect for the father ("... je faisais attention à ce que j'écrivais. Je pensais

à lui ...” (296)) and modesty before the mother (“Je lui racontais les histoires que j’écrivais, passant sous silence les scènes érotiques.” (296)) He then compares the present with the relative freedom and openness of earlier days: “On parlait d’engagement ... Nous étions dans le combat d’idées” (296). He names Sartre and Camus, Genet and Bataille, and Fanon. Salim contrasts this period with the present, when it is not so much the discussion of facts which is dangerous and controversial, but above all the creation of fictions:

Aujourd’hui les mots sont aussi graves et dangereux qu’avant : ils tuent ou, plus exactement, ce ne sont pas les mots qui tuent, mais ceux qui les lisent et décident de supprimer leur auteur. Ce qui provoque les foudres de ces lecteurs particuliers, ce n’est jamais la réalité ; ce qu’ils ne supportent pas, c’est cette réalité passée dans les mots, dite par une fiction. L’imaginaire est plus menaçant que le réel. (297)

Ben Jelloun’s thesis here, as ostensibly expressed through the writing of Salim, seems to be that free expression is given its power—indeed is given its drama in its own right—through its very suppression by the authorities. Ben Jelloun implies that the authorities’ fear is justified, that they do well to constrict the flow of ideas of free-thinking writers, for these ideas strike at the heart of the neuroses of the controlling classes, at their fear of the imaginary—the expression of everything which is possible or impossible.

Salim’s political exposé slowly turns into a rant, however, and soon encompasses the state of the entire Arab world.

Hélas, le monde arabe flirte avec le chaos ... Ce pessimisme-là n’arrange rien dans notre solitude ... face au fanatisme qui couvre nos maisons comme une couverture destinée à nous servir de linceul en cas de victoire de l’ignorance et de la grande brutalité de ceux qui logent deux balles dans la nuque du poète. (297)

Ben Jelloun's exploration of the theme of freedom of expression becomes overtly political at this point. But his condemnation of a society which sees its poets murdered is only ever vague and foreboding. He criticizes a tendency, or even an historical trend, and suggests no solution except in the need for a change in general attitude.

4.8 *Creation of fictions*

To conclude the letter to Salman Rushdie, Salim evokes the solidarity between writers, defining this as based on the common purpose of defending the freedom of the imagination:

... que ... il y a une solidarité entre créateurs de fiction et que je tiens à vous dire : " Je ne suis pas d'accord avec vous sur tout, mais je vous soutiens dans votre combat pour la liberté d'écrire et d'inventer. "

... peut-être faisons-nous partie de la même communauté ... la communauté qui n'a que les mots pour exister et pour vivre avec les autres ...

Notre patrie est un livre, un rêve bleu dans une mer d'histoires ... notre territoire est en nous. (298)

It is the proposition of this fictional territory which allows the freedom which Salim seeks and which those in power fear. It is a territory over which those possessing temporal power can have no dominion. The notable transition from the colonial period, about which Salim reminisces, to the present, consists in the fact that the powerful seem now to have become aware of this territory, and have designs upon it. Instead of merely subversive ideas, it is the very essence of fictionality, of fiction-creating, which the powerful identify as a threat, resulting in a general repression of creative writers in this society.

Zina initially develops a symbiotic relationship with the city of Tangier, and she employs aspects of this relationship to withdraw from her role of

narrator. We have seen that the city of Tangier is able to create its own fictions with its fabulations concerning the supposed activities of Zina, but here we find an organism which, bound as it is by collective paranoia, is unable to withstand the implications of its own fictions. Its freedom to imagine is accompanied by the same weakness which enables Zina to become enamoured of the Spanish gentleman, and which is manifested in the capacity of the Tangérois "de se faire peur" (98).

Il leur manquait la force d'être nécessaire pour supporter ce qui avait déclenché en eux ce sentiment de culpabilité où germait l'idée du malheur. (98)

This is the atmosphere in which the rumours of Zina's diabolical nature gain currency, according to the narrator. The stories about her are a curious mix of the apparently innocuous and the fancifully terrifying.

... elle vit avec les araignées et les chauve-souris ... elle s'habille dans des tissus transparents, elle mange du jambon et danse le flamenco ... partout où elle va allument des incendies ... [elle] brûle les champs de maïs ... (100-1)

Zina takes on a fictional existence separate from the primary one with which we are presented in the first part of the work, and this new existence is itself ostensibly a creation of Zina's own dreams, although sublimated by its reliance on the one-armed narrator (Dahmane) whom she herself has invented. At this point the provenance of this narration becomes quite opaque and we are not aware of its dependence on Zina, at least as we know her from the start of the novel. This fictional existence enjoys apparent freedom, therefore, from Zina's imagination, which gave birth to it, although it is conversely subject to the vicissitudes of the Tangérois' imagination, and consequently to their corrupted view of their city.

Tanger est maudite, on ne lui veut que du mal ... Zina est un indice, la preuve qu'on cherche à ruiner Tanger ...

« Zina-Tanger/Tanger-Zina. » (101)

The various implied existences of Zina become further embedded to an almost enigmatic extent when her invented storyteller reads part of the narrative to himself in the presence of his sleeping wife, instead of to the café audience: “Jamila dort en ronflant. La lumière est faible. Dahmane lit en éclairant les pages avec une lampe de poche ...” (172). In what sense is this silent reading important to Zina? It is, after all, the story which she has set down, read by a character she has dreamt up. Perhaps it is only by such convolutions that a self-aware fictional character gains control of her fate and frees herself from the constraints of a fictional existence, a kind of narrative sleight-of-hand to ensure her own survival.

The character Salim, though a fictional invention of Zina’s, ends up by telling a major part of her story, thereby illustrating the self-fictionalization which is a major theme of the book. Salim’s re-entry into the story appears to represent a turning point in Zina’s quest since with him she has had the first sexual relationship which seems to be devoid of any kind of sado-masochistic patterns of exploitation and revenge, even though there is a good deal of sexual manipulation on Zina’s part. Salim apparently desires above all to understand Zina, and long after his relationship with her protégée Houda is ended he is haunted by the enigma of the woman who had such complete power over him. He resolves, in his turn, to embark on a quest to lay this old ghost to rest, to free himself from the enduring influence of Zina. This comes after Zina has worked through the evil past of her five women followers (representing aspects of herself) by devising schemes of revenge for the men who have wronged them.

Salim’s motivations of self-liberation lend him greater insight into the fictional context in which he finds himself. Here we find this expressed through his apparent authorial concerns about Zina’s role in the story:

« ... Qui l’aurait chargée [Zina] de mettre de l’ordre dans les sentiments et de rectifier les souvenirs des uns et des autres ? Qui se serait glissé dans ses nuits pour assurer ce pouvoir ? J’ai décidé de savoir. ... Comme par hasard, c’est dans le désastre

du monde que je me retrouve, dans la souffrance des innocents
que je me reconnais. » (23)

We will see that Salim's quest for freedom involves the definition of many boundaries like this one where a corollary to freedom makes itself apparent. Salim's very seeking after Zina in the town of Chaouen assumes the role of a liberating quest not just for Salim but in some ways for Zina herself. It is as if Zina (remember that she is still the original, top-level narrator, and Salim is the creation of one of the narrators she has invented) has found the maturity and self-assurance to express herself through a reasonably sympathetic character. Her dark side becomes easier and easier to confront, so that there is eventually a convergence of wills between herself and those she apparently manipulates. Here Salim ponders the chance by which he encounters the funeral procession:

Mauvais présage, ou au contraire, symbole de bon augure ? Il était venu à Chaouen enterrer sa vie passée marquée par la présence ou le souvenir d'une femme, Zina. C'était pour s'en débarrasser qu'il était venu à Chaouen. Il voulait repartir à zéro, même si à son âge tout devenait compliqué. (259)

The narrative seems to be consciously providing a symbol which tallies with the intent of the character, proving a thinly veiled complicity between the narrator and the character, suggesting a self-conscious creation of the story by the narrator to fit the character. Given the deliberate similarities between Salim and the author we are compelled to examine the episode of Salim as representing a fictionalized representation of the author's quest for freedom from his characters, and from Zina in particular. We shall see that this quest is not such a simple one as we imagine an author may think, as Salim becomes the victim of Zina's manipulative tendencies once again.

Zina's self-fictionalization continues its mystifying trend during the episode of her eventual confrontation with Bachar. Although he has been speaking of her in the third person, the reader still retains the impression,

albeit a confused one, that Zina is the narrator. Some fifteen pages previously in the novel, at the beginning of the chapter entitled “Kenza”, we have the last apparent sign that Zina is narrating:

Cet homme allait tomber entre les belles mains de Kenza, une de mes messagères ... J’ai mis toute mon âme dans son être. Je l’ai fait comme on fait un pain. C’est son image qui apparaît quand je me regarde dans le miroir. (183)

However, this chapter closes with one explicit reference to Zina, this time in the third person: “Abid et Salim étaient bien placés pour savoir de quoi était capable Zina” (188). Apparently, the opening paragraph is another unacknowledged editorial-style interruption by Zina in Dahmane’s reading of her diaries. Nevertheless, when Zina confronts Bachar with accusations of his misconduct towards the opposite sex, it is in the manner that an author would castigate himself for the poor quality of his characterization, and it seems as though Zina is talking to herself as author of her notebooks, rather than to Bachar:

« Il me semble que je t’avais expulsé de cette histoire. Tu ne t’en souviens pas. Mais j’avais considéré que tu n’étais pas intéressant. Tu es quelconque et tu n’apportes rien au développement de cette affaire. ... Tu n’es pas un personnage. Et si je t’ai convoqué c’est pour te retirer définitivement du circuit. Car si la rouille, l’humidité et la crapulerie atteignent mes histoires, elles se détraquent, n’osent plus se raconter et meurent. ... »
(198)

Although as a character Bachar is entirely subject to the whims of Zina and her servant and protégée Kenza, it is the very whimsical nature of their control which allows him the freedom even to return to the story and continue what is essentially the episode of the preceding protagonist, Bilal, (as Zina implies here) to its thematic conclusion.

It seems that Zina reincarnates the character of Bilal into her narrative as Bachar in order to engineer this singular confrontation with him and force the reader to analyse her part in the production of her own story. Bachar seems to provide the material for a catharsis in Zina, and we wonder if both Bilal and Bachar do not represent obligatory elements in Zina's psyche, which she deals with half-heartedly at first with Bilal, so that she must therefore reconfront them with the help of Kenza, herself an alternative form of Zina. She then openly confines to the past her battles with the arrogant, presumptuous males for whom she has developed such a compelling contempt. This rupture of dramatic illusion is for Bachar his annihilation as a character, and he is symbolically no longer recognized by his friends at the café. Bachar's exile is a further step towards Zina's freedom.

Dahmane's wife Jamila further accentuates the sense of narrative unease with her appeal for patience to her and Dahmane's audience, for her lack of a story connecting Salim and Zina:

On ne sait pas si c'est Zina qui fabule—les cahiers entre les mains de Dahmane l'attestent—ou si c'est encore un débordement des rêves de Salim. (224)

We also have to deal with the suggestion that Salim is a would-be writer himself, which occurs among a collection of remarks which summarize the awkward relationship between reality and fiction, and which amount to a slightly coy insistence on the author's right to turn up in his story.

Il a dû se dire que l'occasion idéale se présentait à lui pour enfin écrire, sortir de ses rêveries inutiles, passer de l'imagination aux faits ou, plus exactement, aller à la rencontre des faits pour les inclure dans son imagination. C'était son désir inavoué, son rêve secret : écrire au lieu de devoir vivre. (224)

As we have seen, this last phrase, in its similarity to the published utterance of Ben Jelloun "in person", serves as a device to obfuscate the perceived

identity of the narrator by aligning it with the voice of the author as we know him. Is this a hint that the author is attempting to achieve the same goal as Zina through his writing? Does he write to disguise himself and to be free to live while his characters, including the ones representing himself, become lost in the labyrinths of their own fictions? By writing “au lieu de devoir vivre” does one free oneself from the prison of existence by in turn capturing it in a work? I think these ideas are indeed what Ben Jelloun has in mind when he writes, and he is compelled to write such ideas into his work.

But when Salim returns again to the theme of the liberating influence of writing, as he searches for a way to rid himself of the obsession with Zina (“Quelqu’un lui avait dit que le meilleur moyen de quitter une femme, c’était d’écrire son histoire” (259)), he is unconvinced by the power of words to achieve freedom from anything, and his quest continues through his final unsatisfactory meeting with Zina and beyond.

4.9 Freedom in other novels

Freedom is shown by Mustapha Marrouchi to be identified with ritual initiation in Ben Jelloun’s work, who notes:

Whether in the case of *Harrouda*, *La Prière de l’absent*, or *La Nuit sacrée*, the spatial montage of the narrative evokes a ritual initiatory path, at the end of which, and after having undergone many trials, the young person finally attains initiation into a higher realm of knowledge. This is how the child in *La Prière de l’absent* learns what true liberty is. . . (Marrouchi, 73)

Marrouchi goes on to cite from *La Prière de l’absent*, as Yamna repeats Lalla Malika’s definition of freedom: “La liberté, c’est d’abord la dignité” (73). We see that Ben Jelloun links rituals of initiation with the very concept of freedom, in a scheme which is utopian in design and through a ritual which

is individual and inspired—an “original” ritual. The ritual itineraries in the other two novels mentioned by Marrouchi are no less so.

The concept of freedom is introduced in other forms in the novel *La Nuit sacrée* also. In this work we are treated to a meeting of minds between Zahra and the Consul on the subject of freedom of thought, as she replies:

Mais voyez-vous, je suis comme vous, j’aime le Coran comme une poésie superbe, et j’ai horreur de ceux qui l’exploitent en parasites et qui limitent la liberté de la pensée. Ce sont des hypocrites. . . . Ils invoquent la religion pour écraser et dominer. Et moi, j’invoque le droit à la liberté de penser, de croire ou de ne pas croire. Cela ne regarde que ma conscience. J’ai déjà négocié ma liberté avec la nuit et ses fantômes. (*La Nuit sacrée*, 79)

Already in this novel we can detect a certain ambiguity in the conceptualization of freedom. In this passage Zahra imagines the defenders of religion as impinging on the freedom of unbelievers and believers, while at the same time admitting that in some sense freedom is something which must be negotiated with oneself, with “la nuit et ses fantômes”. Zahra tacitly evokes therefore two kinds of freedom, the *permission* to speak freely and the *ability* not to be constrained by one’s fear of freedom and the unknown possibilities that freedom implies.

In *La Nuit sacrée* Zahra indentifies freedom with self-sufficiency and therefore with a certain essential absence—the absence of encumbrances and of possessions, a stripping-back to the essentials. In this case the essentials are defined as the body:

Je suis une errance qu’aucune religion ne retient. Je vais et traverse les mythes, indifférente. . .

— C’est ce qu’on appelle la liberté. . .

— Oui, se dépouiller de tout, ne rien posséder pour ne pas être possédée. Libre, c’est-à-dire disponible, en avance sur les entraves, peut-être en avance sur le temps. (*La Nuit sacrée*, 83–4)

In *L'Écrivain public* the narrator, having achieved a certain degree of tranquility in the solitude of his newly-whitewashed room, wanders in his imagination to Medina in ancient times. He recalls his childhood fear of the consequences of impiety and his liberation from that fear:

Quand j'étais enfant, mes parents m'obligeaient à faire la prière. Je la faisais par crainte des châtements exposés en détail dans le Coran, réservés à l'infidèle, au mauvais musulman : enfer éternel, géhenne sans fin, prières rendues sur plaque métallique rougie par le feu... Je priais sans grande conviction. Un jour mon père me dit : « Prier c'est être devant Dieu, et si tu n'es pas sincère, il vaut mieux ne pas te présenter du tout ! » Ces paroles me libérèrent. (*L'Écrivain public*, 142)

That this apparently innocuous phrase of his father's suffices to free the narrator from this fear is testament enough to the liberating power of words, a point which is noticeable in the narrator's emphasis on the word "paroles" itself. This phrase is also shown to provoke an imaginative escape from this fear, in stark contrast to the captivity in which his gruesomely imagined punishments had confined him previously. He has a dream in which his own funeral is taking place:

J'étais mort et j'assistais, assis sur la branche principale du citronnier qui était dans un coin de la cour, j'assistais donc à mes funérailles. J'étais serein, calme et en bonne santé. Je regardais toute ma famille accablée. ... De mon arbre, je riaais en silence. Tout était parfait. J'étais sain et sauf et je pouffais de rire. La mort n'était que cela : un détachement discret et même agréable qui nous rend observateurs de nous-mêmes. En plus j'étais persuadé de l'avoir emporté sur toutes les menaces de châtiment : celui qu'on avait déposé sur la natte n'était qu'un morceau de bois, une planche creuse. (143)

Thus the same imagination which held him in fear of the consequences of impiety upon his death eventually liberates him, as his father's words open the way for new imaginative possibilities. The eternal tree which symbolizes the source of his life also protects him in death, and his freedom to control the imaginative possibilities of the unknowable nature of death even affords him some pleasure.

Conclusion

The theme of freedom is one which takes on overwhelming importance in *La Nuit de l'erreur*, where the concept is approached from a myriad of angles. Although this work makes analogies with real-life concepts of freedom, the book primarily explores the area of a fictional character's idea of her own freedom. We find that this idea of freedom is dependent, in the realm of the fictional work, on the ability to experiment with and to harness the innate powers, both "magical" and otherwise, which the character has been granted—but not to become a slave to these powers—as well as on the presence of a character's authentic drive for knowledge. Removing oneself from a role of power, such as that of narrator, is one method for a character to protect herself from such powers. Characters who lack these qualities attain no real freedom, while those who do possess these qualities gradually become aware of the context of their existence—the book itself.

5. ENIGMA

This chapter will examine the theme of the enigmatic in Ben Jelloun's novel *L'Enfant de sable*. This novel can be examined as an elaborate tissue of pretence, tricks, mazes, mystification, teasing and subtle mockery of the reader. This is expressed by Ben Jelloun through overt reference to the enigma (or secret) which is contained in the narrative or the journals referred to in them. There are also hints of the existence of a code with which the characters must grapple, and related keys. On the narrative level, we are confronted with oblique and overt references to and borrowings from the works of Jorge Luis Borges, as well as his incorporation into the plot of *L'Enfant de sable* in the character of the blind troubadour.

The element of enigma in this work also reveals an important aspect of narrative voice employed by Ben Jelloun. Simply, this can be described in the following way: Ben Jelloun's characters behave *as if they know* they are characters in a book. The author places himself at the extreme end of the scale opposite verisimilitude, but not to the extent that the characters rebel against their position and appear to act like real people imprisoned in their role. We shall see how they subtly appear to mock the reader with their knowledge, how some perversely challenge the reader to decipher the puzzle of the book while misleading him and creating problems which have no solution.

5.1 *Conspiring to produce the enigma*

Amar's narration refers explicitly to the enigmatic aspect of the story as such, while placing the fascination for this "histoire folle" in the context

of a society characterized by subtle violence; a people compelled to act according to prejudice built upon pretence and mystification:

... je me demande ce qui m'a passionné dans cette histoire. Je crois savoir que c'est d'abord l'aspect énigmatique, et ensuite je pense que notre société est très dure, ça n'a pas l'air, mais il y a une telle violence dans nos rapports qu'une histoire folle, comme celle de cet homme avec un corps de femme, est une façon de pousser cette violence très loin, à son extrême limite.
(*L'Enfant de sable*, 160)

The creation of the enigma begins with the conspiracy between the father and mother. Ahmed, the father, determines that his eighth daughter must be brought up as a boy, in order to preserve his inheritance. Only the father, mother, midwife and the child herself, who is also to be named Ahmed (actually Mohamed Ahmed), must know the secret. The father instructs his wife in a way which reflects the double act of creation involved—the physical creation of the child itself and the creation of the mystery of the child's assumed gender: “Toi, bien entendu, tu seras le puits et la tombe de ce secret. Ton bonheur et même ta vie en dépendront” (23), and the narrator explicitly refers to the implications for the mother's life in functional terms, and as if her life were merely a story outside of any pretence to a physical reality:

Sa vie allait avoir un sens; elle était embarquée dans le navire de l'énigme qui allait voguer sur des mers lointaines et insoupçonnées. (23)

This sentence seems to imply that it is the secret itself which provides the new-found meaning to the mother's life. The mother is a weak, outcast character who uses her complicity in the secret to give her life meaning.

Later in the novel, alternative narrators appear who were affected by the conspiracy, speaking of the effects of the mystery on them, and their

desire to in some way sublimate the effects through their narratives. Remember that even for those who did not suspect the deception of Ahmed's father, her isolation and marriage to the epileptic cousin from the father's rival brother's family creates a sense of unease among both families. The final narrator, the "man in the blue turban", represents the character of Ben Jelloun himself (he refers to Ahmed as death visiting him in the guise of "un personnage ... qui me menaçait ... Il me reprochait d'avoir trahi le secret" (203)). This narrator is visited by a relative of Ahmed's, who tells him:

J'ai besoin d'être délivrée du poids de cette énigme. ... On a découvert la véritable identité de mon oncle le jour de sa mort. ... J'ai pensé qu'en rendant publique cette histoire on en ferait une légende, et, comme chacun sait, les mythes et les légendes sont plus supportables que la stricte réalité. (207)

This narrator subsequently closes the novel in a fashion which leaves no hope for a resolution of the mysteries raised along the way:

Lorsque le livre fut vidé de ses écritures par la pleine lune, j'eus peur au début, mais ce fut là les premiers signes de ma délivrance. J'ai moi aussi tout oublié. ... Moi, je dépose là devant vous le livre, l'encrier et les porte-plume. Je m'en vais lire le Coran sur la tombe des morts ! (208–9)

Other novels by Ben Jelloun figure enigma in a similar role. In *Les Yeux baissés* also the concept of the enigma is an integral part of the story embodied in the work—the legend of a girl who will be born with the key to the hidden treasure of the village, which turns out to be the realization that the village sits atop a hidden source of precious water—as we glimpse in the explicit statement: "Telle est l'énigme; une histoire qui a cent ans et qui te poursuit aujourd'hui" (213). Thus the themes of enigma and storytelling are linked and assume a controlling position over the narrative in the two novels.

If we can generalize about the connection between the enigma and the story, as the preceding quotation seems to suggest we can, allowing storytelling to represent artistry in general, we may assume some statement is being made in these two novels about the artistic and the enigmatic. Hints are found throughout *L'Enfant de sable*, of which the following reference to the female warrior Andar is most explicit in this regard:

Lorsqu'on le déshabilla, pour le laver et le couvrir du linceul, on découvrit avec la stupeur que vous imaginez que c'était une femme dont la beauté apparut brusquement comme l'essence de cette vérité cachée, comme l'énigme qui oscille entre les ténèbres et l'excès de lumière. (85)

This sentence attempts to describe a connection between the elements of enigma, ritual, truth and beauty. The common tacit element in terms of *L'Enfant de sable* is the theme of dissimulation itself, of pretence—which is also arguably the distinguishing characteristic of the artistic. Just as the important element of a ritual is pretence (of performing a function which has no demonstrable connection with the ceremony), in other words an ostensible function which serves as a disguise, here a character conceals her true nature which is then only discovered at her death, (subjectively speaking never really discovered, from Andar's point of view as author of the deception). The revelation of her true nature is seen in the same terms as the solution of an enigma. It is an enigma which is impossible to grasp; it “oscillates between darkness and excessive light”. This is why, importantly from the point of view of the narrative, it is only discovered after her death, when it is “too late”. The nature of it would be utterly different if it had been discovered while she was still alive: it would be merely a scandal, something ugly. Instead even her physical beauty is melded with the meaning of her dissimulation, it is not a lie discovered but a “hidden truth”. Because the deception has been played out entirely to its end in Andar's death, it enters the realm of legend; the deception has then become fiction, and the ugly beautiful.

5.2 *Undoing the enigma*

Ahmed's identity crisis reaches its culmination when she is interrogated by a strange woman during her flight from her family:

La question fut incisive :

— Qui es-tu ?

J'aurais pu répondre à toutes les questions, inventer, imaginer mille réponses, mais c'était là la seule, l'unique question qui me bouleversait et me rendait littéralement muette. (113)

This is the question which recognizes the nature of the enigma in its essence, instead of misinterpreting it as a question for which an answer may be proposed by the observer. Effectively, the questioner asks the question which the stranger poses by her presence. Someone in disguise seeks to provoke a misleading answer in the observer, but is usually also prepared to support the image with lies. The enigma, on the other hand, is trapped in the tissue of its own pretence—not even the perpetrator of the puzzle knows the answer; Ahmed has become her own enigma, and not knowing the truth, she cannot lie to conceal it.

The author also explores this theme through a metaphoric technique which borders on mystification; the narrator answers the enigmatic question with a series of images which appear to demand the search for a common element:

Qui suis-je ? Et qui est l'autre ? Une bourrasque du matin ? Un paysage immobile ? Une feuille tremblante ? Une fumée blanche au-dessus d'une montagne ? Une giclée d'eau pure ? Un marécage visité par les hommes désespérés ? Une fenêtre sur un précipice ? Un jardin de l'autre côté de la nuit ? Une vieille pièce de monnaie ? Une chemise recouvrant un homme mort ? Un peu de sang sur des lèvres entrouvertes ? Un masque mal posé ? Une perruque blonde sur une chevelure grise ? (55)

Here the question is also misleading; the list of disparate objects implies a puzzle other than a straightforward question of identity. Is an answer to the puzzle called for? Ironically this passage is effective in the way it casts doubt on the reliability of symbolic interpretation. What all the items listed seem to have in common is a deception—or a secret which has been betrayed. They are the symbolic counterparts of omens, and the interpretation of an omen is never obvious, at least not until the presaged event comes about. Ben Jelloun's technique involves showing the reader misleading clues of the sort which torment his characters, but they happen to be ones which also trace the theme of their error. The author's conception of the search for meaning and the false clues along the way naturally encompasses the Muslim attitude towards God, as he has the first narrator comment:

Nous devons à présent nous glisser par les brèches dans la muraille, les ouvertures oubliées ; nous devons marcher sur la pointe des pieds et tendre l'oreille, pas le jour mais le soir, quand la lune donne de l'ombre à notre histoire, quand les étoiles se ramassent dans un coin du ciel et observent le monde qui s'assoupit.

Ô mes amis, je n'ose parler en votre compagnie de Dieu, l'indifférent, le suprême. ... Je me souviens d'une parole dite par un grand écrivain, elle m'intrigue encore : « Nous ne savons pas où Dieu met ses accents, et la vie est pudique comme un crime. » (65)

When the characters are trapped by the enigmatic nature of the story they are compelled to think outside of the usual parameters of the puzzle, to undermine its very construction. God is too indifferent, and life too "modest", to give sufficient reliable clues to unravel the mysteries of existence; life's choices are limited to the pragmatic and are mutually exclusive. The implication is that fiction and storytelling, or the work of the imagination, overcome these limitations to explore all the possibilities and even the im-

possibilities of the universe. This sentiment often translates into an argument for freedom of speech in Ben Jelloun's works.

The concept of the perverse is relevant in this respect also. Perversion, as the inversion of the expected order, leads to the self-mystification of some of the characters, in the sense that they go beyond expected modes of thinking, and those who are confronted by them react as they would if confronted with a puzzle.

Je suis le frère de Fatima, la femme d'Amed, enfin celle qui
joua le rôle de l'épouse, mais une épouse qui se laissa entraîner
dans le tourbillon d'une perversion trop compliquée pour nous,
braves et bons musulmans. (67–8)

The situation is perverse because it falls outside of the realm of experience of the characters, they are unable to deal with the inversion of what they regard as the natural social order. Perversion in this sense resembles the tricks of an enigma, by identifying the area of ignorance or inexperience of the victim and conducting oneself within that area. Note that it is implicitly the circumstances, and therefore the story, that constitute the "whirlpool" Fatima is caught in. Ahmed is prepared to go further than others would dare (by marrying her epileptic cousin), and she therefore becomes outrageous, perverse, and in some sense the creator of the labyrinth.

She is nevertheless trapped by it herself, and is like "the wizard who fashioned a labyrinth and was then doomed to wander in it to the end of his days" (Borges, "Deutsches Requiem," 179). In instances such as this where a character is portrayed as the author of her own story it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the implied ultimate powerlessness of such a metaphorical author extends to Ben Jelloun's philosophy as far as his own authorship is concerned; that is, that the author's striving for freedom is motivated by the consciousness of the weight of forces restraining him.

Even the dutiful public servant in *L'Homme rompu* is perverse in his denial of the corrupt society which surrounds him, and therefore sets himself

an impossible task by resisting its trends. His resistance leads to his own physical disintegration, as Jacques Pécheur has interpreted the novel:

Avec ce récit, Tahar Ben Jelloun nous offre un véritable petit traité (au sens ancien) de la corruption ou un apologue sur l'impossibilité d'être étranger dans la tribu. ...

... ici règne la loi du destin : une trajectoire pure en quelque sorte ... un face-à-face de l'homme avec lui-même et avec ses semblables ...

Et le choix va s'emparer de lui-même ; il ne laisse pas de place au quant à soi orgueilleux, à la révolte impossible, il faut faire avec ... (Pécheur, 13)

In the context of Morocco's corrupt society, Mourad's refusal to be corrupted is outrageous, and his attempt to fashion his own destiny in defiance of the forces ranged against him casts his story into the realm of the impossible. This impossibility of being at once inside and outside the "tribe", as Pécheur puts it, is analogous to the impossibility of being at once storyteller and character, author and reader; dichotomies into which Ben Jelloun's narrative plunges over and over, and which is the source of much of the drama of his work.

The depiction of Fatima's epileptic fits reinforces the preoccupation with the wrestling with puzzles, this time using the symbol of the knot, an even more unforgiving image in comparison with the labyrinths, mirrors and so on ascribed to the other characters, which reflects the depth of her impotence during her crises:

Son corps s'en allait, loin de sa conscience. Il se livrait à des gesticulations incontrôlées, se débattait tout seul, avec le vent, avec les démons. On la laissait seule débrouiller les fils de tous ces nœuds. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 73-4)

Fatima’s struggle metaphorically reflects the reader’s struggle with the conflicting and intertwining threads of the story, and that of the author himself, who is compelled to battle “tout seul” with the threads of his imagination in order to create the story. As for the epileptic, though, there is no resolution of the puzzle: the meanings remain hidden and the causes mysterious.

5.3 *“Le secret”, puzzles, the hidden and the apparent*

These private battles of Ben Jelloun’s characters are usually characterized in the narrative as a confrontation with what he refers to as “le secret”, the philosophy behind which seems to be expounded by the blind troubadour in statements that mirror the Borges story “The Zahir” (Borges, 1970e, 189).

En 1929, nous avons eu à Buenos Aires une monnaie courante de vingt centimes et qui s’appelait le Zahir. Vous savez bien ce que signifie ce mot : l’apparent, le visible. C’est le contraire du bâttène, qui est l’intérieur, ce qui est enterré dans le ventre. N’est-ce pas cela le secret ? Mais ce qui est curieux, c’est que la pièce de monnaie avec ses deux figures semblables enlevait au secret une part de son mystère. Je sais, pour l’avoir noté par écrit, que le Zahir est le fond d’un puits à Tétouan, comme il serait, selon Zotenborg, une veine dans le marbre de l’un des mille deux cents piliers à la mosquée de Cordoue. (176)

One of the basic dilemmas of writing fiction or of any kind of imaginative expression is that of how best to make the hidden (represented here by the bâttène) apparent. We can therefore understand the disparateness of the manifestations of the apparent (Zahir) here (the bottom of a well, a vein in a marble pillar; in Borges’s story he also lists a tiger, a blind man, an astrolabe and a compass), since they represent imaginative, fictional possibilities. The fact that the apparent “takes away a part of the mystery”

despite the Zahir coin itself being a part of the “secret” seems to reinforce this dilemma of the artist to some extent: how to preserve the mystique of the hidden while making it in some way visible. Ben Jelloun appropriates Borges’s technique of using apparently prosaic objects which nevertheless contain the possibility of magical or unfathomable functions. Their presentation as mere objects in a list then becomes the mask begging the reader to remove it and ascribe his own portentous meanings.

The novel *La Prière de l’absent* has also attracted comment for its deliberate emphasis on the unsayable, the suggestion of the very impossibility of telling the story, with all the contradiction that implies. In Habib Salha’s article, this aspect is characterized as a rejection of the “project” of the book itself.

L’itinéraire jellounien reste cependant inachevé. L’auteur veut-il montrer que l’histoire est toujours “ailleurs dans un puits, cachée par les sables?”. On a beau puiser dans le miroir suprême, la vérité ne se donne pas. “Qu’est-ce qu’un livre qui ne se renie pas lui-même?”, proclame le maître. (Salha, 92)

This failure to provide any type of closure to the self-defined “project” of the novel seems deliberately designed to maintain the enigmatic nature of the story, to posit enigma as one of the defining blueprints for the novel’s structure. This implies a defiant attitude which is taken up by Salha when he notes the author’s discussion of the idea of betrayal as a function of writing:

Sindibad est un “Moha impossible”. La mystification des ancêtres, du passé est une mort suprême, une trahison infinie. L’écriture, pour Tahar Ben Jelloun, n’a pas de sens sans trahison. “La trahison, précise-t-il, se situe quelque part dans cette mise en place d’un faux-miroir. Trahir, c’est cela : perturber la lassitude, inquiéter le lac tranquille de nos certitudes”. (94)

The very *modus operandi* of the work seems to rely upon an assumption of the creation of a mystery, not in literal terms as part of the intrigue of the novel, but in terms of the basis of the writing itself. The writing is mystery, is magic, and as such must hide its purpose from the reader, which is to betray the readers themselves. The false mirror reflects a distorted image of the reader, which can only be revealed as representing him through his own enquiry. As Salha notes:

[*La Prière de l'absent*] est une autobiographie impossible, un récit de vie qui ne peut s'écrire à partir de ses récits de l'absence. ... L'absence de récit suivi le transforme en autoportrait. Le vide, l'absence à soi/de soi invitent le lecteur à construire le récit qui ne se construit pas. Le miroir s'est mué en pléthore de miroirs. (94)

So it is also an impossible biography of its readers, since they too have been taken on this impossible journey which has no conclusion, inserting their lives in the gaps left by the narrative.

Borges also seems to explain his own narrative technique in magical terms. Something akin to this subtle relationship between the hidden and the apparent is recalled in the attitude of Borges with regard to the application of the characteristics of magic to the fictional space. In a 1968 interview the writer discusses with Juan José Saer an article he had written on this subject.

—Borges, il y a un de vos articles, *L'Art et la magie*, dans lequel...

—Je me rappelle très vaguement.

—Moi aussi pour l'instant, mais votre thèse est que...

—Ah oui. Je sais. La thèse de l'article est que, de même que la magie pratique des actes qui influent sur la réalité, de même on trouve dans l'art de la narration des circonstances plus ou moins imperceptibles qui préfigurent ce qui se passera plus tard,

non? ... Je voulais dire que ce qui advient dans une œuvre narrative doit être préparé. Et que ce qui se faisait alors tiendrait le rôle de petites opérations magiques, n'est-ce pas? (Borges, 1999, 22)

The parallel which Borges draws here is remarkable in the sense that he uses an apocryphal statement about reality to justify a concept in fiction. He thereby imbues the act of writing with the characteristics of an imaginary science, introducing the realm of what we understand to be imaginary yet separate from fiction into the mechanics of fiction itself. In much the same vein, Ben Jelloun can be shown to perform this sleight-of-hand for ritual.

Even the subject of science, instead of providing a rationalizing influence in this context, is understood in terms of its role in defining what questions should be considered the most puzzling:

C'était, je crois, dans un des contes des *Mille Nuits et Une Nuit*, l'histoire de cette savante nommée Tawaddud qui, pour sauver son maître de la débâcle, lui proposa de comparaître devant le calife Hârûn al-Rachid et répondre aux questions les plus difficiles des savants ... C'est un conte sur la science et la mémoire. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 174–5)

This test is a series of puzzles the mastery of which saves Tawaddud's master from actual physical ruin. Although the test has ludic connotations, as in a parlour game, i.e. an imaginative aspect, its effects are temporal; *The Thousand and One Nights* is full of such examples of the capriciously distributed effects of a character's intelligence on his fortune. The importance for Ben Jelloun's work is the relationship between the fictional or imaginative and the actual, and the parallels between the way this relationship is depicted in the work and the implied relationship between the reader and Ben Jelloun's work. (I examine the role of ritual in making explicit these implications in Chapter 3, especially pages 53 ff.)

5.4 Codes and keys, ignorance versus knowledge

It is not merely the proposal of a mystery or secret which sets Ben Jelloun's work in the realm of the enigmatic, but the hints of the keys with which the enigma should supposedly be unravelled. The pairing of the mystery and its key is often illustrated in Ben Jelloun's work by the use of a literal code. As a child, along with a collection of imaginary animals with bizarre attributes, the narrator of *Les Yeux baissés* creates a code consisting of invented characters.

J'avais une planche coranique ... sur laquelle j'écrivais des lettres qui n'était ni berbères, ni arabes, ni étrangères. C'étaient des signes qui m'appartenaient; j'étais la seule à en connaître les clés, le sens et la destinée. (*Les Yeux baissés*, 31)

This alphabet is part of a system of personal fictional space held together by its secret status, which is later ruined when her brother abuses the confidence she places in him by usurping power over this world. The characteristic reference to keys is present, though it is not as prevalent in *Les Yeux baissés* as it is throughout *L'Enfant de sable*. The following long passage from *L'Enfant de sable*, for example, is extraordinary for the range of elements and concepts, juxtaposed in poetic fashion and demanding a complex reading with regard to narrative and authorial point of view, as well as the revelation of the symbolic key.

Et puis tout s'est arrêté, tout s'est figé : l'instant est devenu une chambre, la chambre est devenue une journée ensoleillée, le temps une vieille carcasse oubliée dans cette caisse en carton, dans cette caisse il y a de vieilles chaussures dépareillées; une poignée de clous neufs, une machine à coudre Singer qui tourne toute seule, un gant d'aviateur pris sur un mort, une araignée fixée dans le fond de la caisse, une lame de rasoir Minora, un œil en verre, et puis l'inévitable miroir en mauvais état et qui

s'est débarrassé de toutes ses images, d'ailleurs tous ces objets dans la caisse sont de sa propre et seule imagination, depuis qu'il s'est éteint, depuis qu'il est devenu un simple morceau de verre, il ne donne plus d'objets, il s'est vidé durant une longue absence... (*L'Enfant de sable*, 166–7)

All the keys mentioned in this passage can be interpreted by their context as functional equivalents in the making of the enigma. Only their fictive implication as such makes them perform this function, that is, only the fact of their existence as words on a page gives them the quality of keys in the mystery, for this litany pointedly has no other function in the narrative. The cardboard box is the book *L'Enfant de sable*, and the objects in it are the words in the book. The book, therefore, is *in its essence* an enigma. We see this more clearly as the narrator continues:

Je sais à présent que la clé de notre histoire est parmi ces vieilles choses. Nous ne sortirons pas de cette chambre sans trouver la clé, et pour cela il va falloir évoquer ne serait-ce que par allusion le double du miroir. C'est un jardin paisible avec des laurier-roses, ce jardin est figé lui aussi, suspendu, il est secret, son chemin est secret, son existence n'est connue que de très rares personnes, celles qui se sont familiarisées avec l'éternité, assises là-bas sur une dalle qui maintient le jour intact, retenu dans leur regard ; elles détiennent les fils du commencement et de la fin ... (167)

Fatouma narrates this lament, which appears to be a commentary on the nature of time with more strong Borgesian influences (the mirror, the implied impossibility of temporal calibration). Ben Jelloun deliberately mixes spatial and temporal terminology ("la chambre est devenue une journée"). Fatouma gives the "key" to the story as a garden, a seemingly prosaic image which nevertheless embodies great complexity, and the specific mention of the poisonous oleander ("laurier-rose") presents another enigma (peaceful

(“paisible”) appearance concealing danger). Ben Jelloun’s key to time, to the passing of the story, is conveyed through the symbolism of static but enigmatic objects.

Marc Gontard, in his analysis of *L’Enfant de sable*, also emphasizes the similarity with Borges evidenced in this passage, as we see in his summary:

C’est toute la théorie borgésienne du récit qui s’inscrit ainsi dans l’insertion intertextuelle, actorielle et narrative de l’écrivain argentin dans le texte de Ben Jelloun :

- Réification du fictif : “Votre histoire, parce qu’elle n’est pas une traduction de la réalité m’intéresse.”
- Prolifération des récits dans un texte labyrinthique ...
- Montage du récit sous forme d’énigme dont les clés sont données de manière symbolique. Ainsi les trois signes que laisse la femme au troubadour pour décrypter son récit : un anneau comportant sept clés pour ouvrir les sept portes de la ville ; une petite horloge sans aiguille, datant de 1851, année où fut frappé le *battène* d’Égypte ... un tapis, représentant une scène érotique illustrant elle-même un texte poétique. . . (Gontard, 1993b, 114)

This summary shows how the “réification du fictif” supports the creation of the enigma by divorcing the fiction entirely from reality, with its demands for resolution, coherence and clarity. We see how our relationship to fiction may be posited as inherently bearing the opposite characteristics to our relationship to reality, and that we in fact demand from fiction mystery, concealment, and secrecy.

Elsewhere in *L’Enfant de sable* we find the alleged keys are, like the enigma itself, contained within the realm of the characters’ own consciousness, and the tone and repetitive nature of the narration on this point is part of what I have characterized as teasing of the reader, because it seems as if the narrator is speaking only obliquely to his supposed audience; if one remembers that the “man in the blue turban” is identified with Ben Jelloun himself, the following seems particularly laden with irony:

« Tout est là... et vous le savez... », répète l'homme au turban bleu. Cette phrase dite plusieurs fois par une voix familière fonctionne comme une clé magique devant ouvrir des portes oubliées, ou condamnées. (200)

This is an echo of the introductory storyteller's remarks at the opening of the novel where he proclaims:

Sachez aussi que le livre a sept portes percées dans une muraille large d'au moins deux mètres et haute d'au moins trois hommes sveltes et vigoureux. Je vous donnerai au fur et à mesure les clés pour ouvrir ces portes. En vérité les clés, vous les possédez mais vous ne le savez pas ; et, même si vous le saviez, vous ne sauriez pas les tourner et encore moins sous quelle pierre tombale les enterrer. (13)

Interestingly, the storyteller asserts his authority over the story by virtue of his knowledge of how to keep the secret contained therein, by perpetuating the mystery through the rite of burying the keys once again. We have already seen the preoccupation with the problem of maintaining the mystery while externalizing the story with the symbol of the old coin. The theory behind this dialectic of ignorance versus knowledge is elaborated in the parable of the donkey and the ginger:

Tu connais l'histoire du naïf qui a cuisiné un plat très raffiné au gingembre et l'a offert à l'âne. Celui-ci l'a avalé comme si c'était une poignée de foin. C'est de là qu'est venu le dicton : " Que comprend l'âne au gingembre ? " (*Les Yeux baissés*, 286)

The mechanism at work here, to which the "naïf" is himself oblivious, relies upon the identification of the area of ignorance of the victim, and is analogous to the enigma which is founded on the unknowable, or the impossible problem.

The elements of the personal imaginative space and the manipulation of ignorance are combined in the theme of heresy, a kind of scrambling or encoding which detracts, both refers back to an original text while blinding the audience to the meaning of the new text. Here also, everyone has the key—the characteristic feature is that the original is obvious to all although the version they hear is scrambled—but they don't know it:

Je sais pourquoi certains ne sont pas revenus ce matin : ils n'ont pas supporté la petite hérésie que s'est permis notre personnage. Il a osé détourner un verset du Coran. Mais c'est un être qui ne s'appartient plus. On l'a bien détourné de son destin, et, si, au moment où il traverse une crise, il prend quelque liberté avec un verset, sachons le lui pardonner ! (107)

The heretic believes he sees the true meaning of a scripture when he hears it, he believes the dogma is merely a way of concealing the truth, a mask, and for those who have the key (the wit, the openness of mind) the verse can be turned around to reveal something new.

5.5 *Labyrinth analogy in the structure of L'Enfant de sable*

The structure of Ben Jelloun's works has undergone many analyses, but the following by Pierrette Renard particularly captures the way the author's preoccupation with enigma and mystery contributes to the shape of his work. In discussing the opposition between female (sensation) and male (gaze) in *L'Écrivain public*, she refers to Blanchot:

Ce "regard désintéressé", "regard de l'art" passe inévitablement par la mise à distance et, d'une certaine manière, par la mort : "il est juste de dire que l'expérience de l'artiste est une expérience extatique, dit Blanchot, et qu'elle est, comme celle-ci, une expérience de la mort. Voir comme il faut, c'est essentiellement mourir ..." ... Il est significatif que Ben Jelloun lorsqu'il

parle de langage et de création, s'exprime au fond en termes de poète, qu'il est inévitablement ramené à l'expérience poétique, fondamentale pour lui, car ce qui le préoccupe, au-delà de toute recherche consciente, c'est bien l'approche du mystère de la création. ... L'écriture alors ne repète plus un espace vécu mais crée un espace mental, synthétique, "cosa mentale" selon l'expression de L. de Vinci (Renard, 20-1)

Ben Jelloun's determination to get closer to the mystery of creation, as Renard puts it here, leads him to create his own mental space which is itself essentially mysterious. The way he chooses to structure this space relies upon symbologies which evoke the enigmatic in their very names: the labyrinth, the puzzle, the code, and so on. His self-definition as a poet quite demonstrably embraces the ecstatic nature of creation, as Renard asserts, and therefore its mystery.

The author's insistence on the enigmatic nature of the act of creation is illustrated in *L'Enfant de sable*, where Ben Jelloun uses the Borgesian analogy of the labyrinth in the form of a book to structure the story:

C'est une porte minuscule ; il faut se baisser pour passer. Elle est à l'entrée de la médina et communique avec celle située à l'autre extrémité, qui est utilisée pour sortir. En fait ce sont de fausses entrées. Tout dépend d'où on vient ; c'est commode de savoir que dans toute histoire il existe des portes d'entrée ou de sortie. (49)

The beginning and end of the story become merely the two doors inside a labyrinth and the audience is left with the task of discovering where the "openings" in the labyrinth are which constitute the solution to the story. The narrators in *L'Enfant de sable* insist that the secret is in "the book", that the book itself is the secret. They seem to be speaking obliquely to the real-life reader of *L'Enfant de sable*, exhorting him to overcome the enigma of the existence of the physical manifestation of the work and its

relationship to the fictional space it defines. This passage refers to the non-linear possibilities of a book; one can open it and begin at any point. We insist on the existence of a start and ending out of convenience only, and thus trap ourselves by our own design—as indeed we do if we always assume a labyrinth has openings which lead to the “outside”, and that the goal is to find one. My assertion is that Ben Jelloun’s novel only defines the structure of a puzzle and that the emphasis is on the inevitability of going astray if one sets about solving it.

Fayad details many of the parallels between *L'Enfant de sable* and the Borges story “The Garden of Forking Paths”:

In the troubadour’s tale, the lady had introduced herself giving as a reference the name of an old friend of his, Stephen Albert. ... These details about Stephen Albert are part of Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths.” ... Albert is a scholarly sinologist who explains to the narrator, Yu Tsun ... the idea behind an unusual book written by one of Yu Tsun’s ancestors. This book ... is about the infinity of possible alternatives faced by a character in fiction. If all alternatives are chosen simultaneously, instead of only one as is usually the case, then a literary labyrinth is created, where diverse futures and diverse times proliferate and fork indefinitely. (Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” 295–6)

Ben Jelloun seems to be appropriating this concept of the literary labyrinth for *L'Enfant de sable*. Fayad allows that the parallels with Borges have only just been touched upon in her short article. We should not underestimate the extent to which Ben Jelloun may have attempted to put the techniques elucidated in Borges’s story into practice. Has he created, in a limited way, the book described by Stephen Albert as “an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts. ... in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive”? (Borges, “Garden of Forking Paths,” 50). If so, perhaps

Ben Jelloun skirts around the theme of *L'Enfant de sable* which most preoccupies him, just as the theme of time is absent from the *Garden of Forking Paths* (the fictional volume which is the subject of the story of the same name):

'... I know that of all problems, none disturbed him so greatly nor worked upon him so much as the abysmal problem of time. Now then, the latter is the only problem that does not figure in the pages of the *Garden*. He does not even use the word that signifies time. How do you explain this voluntary omission?' ...

'In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word?'

I thought a moment and replied, 'The word *chess*.'

'Precisely,' said Albert. '*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention. (Borges, "Garden of Forking Paths," 52-3)

If such a motivation existed for the author, the events of the last chapter of *L'Enfant de sable*, where certain characters turn on the one who assigned them their roles in the story, would suggest that the theme of creation (likewise an "abysmal problem") may be a likely candidate, and one which lends itself to the plethora of enigmas, inconsistencies and lack of narrative control in the work.

By the same method which Borges's Albert uses to discover the solution to the riddle of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Marc Gontard identifies the conspicuous holes in Ben Jelloun's text—such as the faded pages of the journal, the anonymous nature of Ahmed's correspondent, the missing pages of Ahmed's calendar—as illustrations of the mystery of the novel. Gontard refers to Ben Jelloun's "texte lacunaire" (Gontard, 1993b, 111), and elaborates the recurring theme of conspicuous absence as a structural element which reinforces the author's attempts to have the work define itself as an enigma. In the references to missing elements, Gontard literally

sees the invisible secret referred to in the work written directly:

Ce secret dont le cahier bleu devient l’allégorie, se trouve lui-même inscrit—textuellement—dans le caractère lacunaire du manuscrit. En effet, sa manifestation la plus évidente réside dans l’évidement, le blanchissement, l’effacement, qui, peu à peu, font disparaître du cahier toute trace lisible. (Gontard, 1993b, 111)

Gontard does not even see the need to mention the *literal* gaps in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s manuscripts, such as the one from *Harrouda* cited on page 49, where I reproduce the deliberate gap in the typesetting followed by a lowercase J, highlighting an ellipsis in the narrative which is not explicitly indicated. These manifold allusions to the thing which is missing, to that which the narrator fails to include in his narrative, testify to the author’s insistence on the reader’s role in filling in the story—a circumstance which Ben Jelloun perhaps feels powerless to prevent in any case.

5.6 Borges and “le secret”

Fayad also illuminates the way in which Borges has influenced Ben Jelloun on the subject of his peculiar concept of the “secret”.

“Le Secret est sacré, mais il n’en est pas moins un peu ridicule” (172). These words—the first uttered by the blind man who comes on stage after Fatouma’s tale—sound quite natural in the novel, where the word “secret” has been mentioned repeatedly by the various storytellers. From the first pages of *L’Enfant de sable*, the reader is confronted with phrases such as “Le secret est là, dans ces pages” (12), “le livre du secret” (13), and “le secret du verbe” (15). Neither is it shocking to associate “sacred” and “ridiculous” with the secret of Ahmed-Zahra. However fitting, though, these words are not Ben Jelloun’s but Borges’s;

they are a direct quotation from his story "The Sect of the Phoenix": "The Secret is sacred, but it is also somewhat ridiculous" (Ficciones 165). (Fayad, 294)

The secret is ridiculous because any secret which possesses an aspect of power must contain an aspect of erroneousness or apparent erroneousness if it is not to be guessed and its power appropriated by another. This is analogous to the social power inherent in rituals (and embodied in religious leaders) because of the erroneous claims of the effects or function of the ritual (eg rain-dancing) which demand and receive an investment of belief from the participants. In fact the secret referred to in Borges's story is defined: "The rite constitutes the secret" (Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix," 132). In *L'Enfant de sable* the audaciousness of the father makes it unlikely that anyone would guess the secret of his daughter's gender. The investment in the ridiculous which he and the other participants in the deception make ends up holding sway over their lives even in excess of the circumstances of the lie itself: the father must subjugate his authority to his daughter in the matter of her marriage to Fatima, and for Ahmed this marriage, which proves tortuous for her, is prompted only by the absurdity of the original deception.

5.7 *The Nature of Borges's incorporation into the text*

Borges's incorporation into Ben Jelloun's text goes hand-in-hand with the legendary enigmatic nature of the Argentine writer (who even inspired a recent novel entitled *There Is No Borges*, in which it was proposed that the historical personage never existed), and with the introduction of the figure of the magician in *L'Enfant de sable*, whose characteristics are largely borrowed from Borges's writing. Déjeux sees the character of the magician appearing from as early as Ben Jelloun's first novel *Harrouda*, in the form of the Moroccan saint Moulay Idriss:

Ce culte des saints intercesseurs, considéré comme non orthodoxe, est bien une de ces composantes archaïques de cet islam maghrébin populaire. Des marabouts, des magiciens et magiciennes, des voyantes-gérisseurs avec leurs rites de divination ou d'initiation font le reste. ...

Des auteurs rendent compte de ces aspects bien enracinés et vivants ...

Dans *Harrouda* de Tahar Ben Jelloun, les mères prient Moulay Idriss ...

« Ces prières étaient dites en marge de l'invocation religieuse ... C'était le seul recours possible ... Verser le cœur qui déborde dans les mains ouvertes du saint. Il se manifestait par bribes dans leurs rêves. Mais les corps se sont fermés sur ces textes ».

(Déjeux, 1986, 59–60)

Not only does Ben Jelloun borrow the character of Borges himself, but he seems to take into account that author's philosophy of himself as a character which we meet in many of his short stories. Fayad, however, identifies the character of the blind troubadour in literal terms with the real-life person of Borges:

Then he [the troubadour] continues: "Je suis cet autre." He is the one who has dreamt the magician.

The troubadour is, however, also Borges, the creator of a magician whom we find in the story "The Circular Ruins." This story is about a wizard who reaches his ultimate goal of dreaming a man, only to find out, years later, that he himself is the dream of another. This discovery is made by the magician when he is not burnt by fire, a proof that he is not real either: ... This passage of Borges also finds an echo in an earlier pas-

sage of *L'Enfant de sable*: "Compagnons ! La scène est en papier ! ... Il suffirait d'une allumette ... Seul notre personnage serait sauf ! ..." ... But in the two chapters of *L'Enfant de sable* under close study here, it should be stressed that this analysis leads beyond mere intertextuality, since the character who delivers the "hypertext" (the ulterior text) is the very same author who is the source of the "hypotext" (the model, or original text). (Fayad, 294)

That is to say they are the same character, with the same attributes, but not identical since one of them existed in "real life" and the other is merely a character in a book. Fayad does not explore further the implications of the identity of these two figures, although it is obvious that it is the nuance of their separateness which defines the significance of the extension to intertextuality which she recognizes here. In other words, the fact that it is (supposedly) the real Borges who recounts the story he in fact wrote is the least unusual element of his appearance.

This is beyond intertextuality because Ben Jelloun makes the borrowing more banal and obvious, by having the blind troubadour use details of Borges's life and literary technique to describe himself (Fayad, 292). It is the differences between the real Borges and the fictional Borges of Ben Jelloun which contain the clues as to Ben Jelloun's design, as we shall see when I reexamine the question of the *bâttène* further on in the chapter.

Further, and perhaps most tellingly, Borges wrote of himself as a fictional character who was writing his works, and Ben Jelloun can be seen as appropriating Borges's own approach wholeheartedly and incorporating it into the story, rather than finding a convenient way of slotting in a tribute to the author. The following passage by Borges may have important implications in this respect:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. ... I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography,

the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. . . . It is no effort for me to confess that he has written some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but to the language and to tradition. (Borges, "Borges and I," 282)

Ben Jelloun has in fact appropriated the character of "the other one, the one called Borges" for *L'Enfant de sable*. His character also "shares" similarities with Borges, but "in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor". His lack of authenticity leaves him open to attack by his own characters in the final chapter of the book, since he himself is just a character.

5.8 Devices common to Ben Jelloun and Borges

Several other devices found in *L'Enfant de sable* reflect the literary philosophy of Borges. The anonymous letter writer seeks to employ the secret in the battle with his impossible desire for Ahmed. He is confronted with a puzzle which has no solution and must therefore employ mystification in the struggle against it:

Notre correspondance doit rester confidentielle. Je compte sur votre sens du secret.

» Le dessein qui me guide et me mène vers vous est frappé du sceau de l'impossible. . . .

» Je resterai encore dans l'ombre d'un anonymat d'où toutes les dérives sont possibles . . . (*L'Enfant de sable*, 60–2)

His strategy echoes Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths". Here the writer of the letters is using the theory of infinite possibilities to make his dream possible. Because the fulfilment of his desire is "frappé du sceau de l'impossible" (60), he remains anonymous to the object of his desire, thus

casting his personality into the realm of the unreal where anything is possible, albeit only in the imagination. As an anonymous being all possibilities for his identity are left open, although none may ultimately be fulfilled in a physical sense. I think of this as the dramatic equivalent of dividing by zero; paradoxically he derives the infinite from the zero of his anonymity. In the same manner Ahmed responds: “vous êtes installé dans cet anonymat qui me rapproche beaucoup de vous” (62).

The mirror device recurs in explicit reference to the unravelling of the enigma. In the following passage it is clear that the narrator regards the enigma as linked to the nature of the soul, defined as what even the observer cannot see in himself. Strangely, one’s “thought” is something which one requires this special mirror to understand. Perhaps this refers to the process of self-examination which precedes putting one’s life down in words, or recreating any character in words.

Un charlatan à qui il confia son malheur lui proposa de lui trouver un miroir d’Inde, spécialement conçu pour les regards amnésiques.

— Avec ce miroir, lui a-t-il dit, tu verras ton visage et ta pensée. Tu verras ce que les autres ne voient pas quand ils te regardent. C’est un miroir pour les profondeurs de l’âme, pour le visible et l’invisible ; c’est l’engin rare que les princes d’Orient utilisaient pour dénouer les énigmes. Crois-moi, mon ami, tu seras sauvé, car tu y verras les astres qui gardent l’Empire du Secret... (150)

The writing slate is a symbol of the vicissitudes of the story—the blank slate may have anything written upon it that is possible to be written, and with the passing of time may be used over and over; therefore time is only significant because it allows for the passing of innumerable stories.

Ce qu’il cherchait, c’est que lui-même il se perdît de vue de manière définitive et surtout de ne plus être porté comme une planche coranique par les flots du temps. (151)

Ahmed is comparable to the slate because she has become the medium for the imagination of her father in assuming a false identity, and later has embellished the work herself with her marriage. And the blind troubadour reverses Borges's awareness of himself as a living being with a fictional counterpart, to speak ironically of himself as the very character in a book which he is:

Situation étrange ! On aurait dit que j'étais dans un livre, un de ces personnages pittoresques qui apparaissent au milieu d'un récit pour inquiéter le lecteur ; j'étais peut-être un livre parmi les milliers serrés les uns contre les autres dans cette bibliothèque où je venais naguère travailler. Et puis un livre, du moins tel que je le conçois, est un labyrinthe fait à dessein pour confondre les hommes, avec l'intention de les perdre et de les ramener aux dimensions étroites de leurs ambitions. (177–8)

This character refers to his actual role as we would imagine Ben Jelloun himself to have intended it. Can the book still fulfil a similar function to *The Garden of Forking Paths*, given that the purport of the work has ostensibly been revealed in it, or is this merely another turn in the labyrinth; one more possibility for the novel, one more fork, that Ben Jelloun saw unimplemented in Borges's story?

The narrator goes on to identify the character of Mohamed as an enigma, and to give his interpretation of the meaning of the story:

Je me dis, à force d'inventer des histoires avec des vivants qui ne sont que des morts et de les jeter dans des sentiers qui bifurquent ou dans des demeures sans meubles, remplies de sable, à force de jouer au savant naïf, voilà que je suis enfermé dans cette pièce avec un personnage ou plutôt une énigme, deux visages d'un même être complètement embourbé dans une histoire inachevée, une histoire sur l'ambiguïté et la fuite ! (178)

The created character (or personality) is the enigma, and its creation and that of the story is here as elsewhere in the novel defined by the verb “*inventer*”. The narrator, who plays the role of author, is characterized as a mischievous inventor; the ease of creation is set against the difficulty of understanding one’s creation, and creation as such. He ironically laments that he is caught up in the ambiguity that he ostensibly intended the story to be about, and likewise seems unable to flee his own story.

In Marc Gontard’s article, many less obvious parallels are drawn between the narrative of *L’Enfant de sable* and the narrative technique of Jorge Luis Borges, from the title, which “évoque un récit connu de Borgès: *Le Livre de sable*” (Gontard, 1993b, 112), to “les références à la *bibliothèque*, symbole du savoir infini mais épuisable” (112), through his extensive and varied use of quotations including “attributions apocryphes et problématiques: “un grand écrivain, un poète grec”...”.

5.9 Borrowed characters deviate in Ben Jelloun’s work

In a notable modification of the intent of the Borges text, the narrator of *L’Enfant de sable* expresses regret at advising his visitor in the words of Stephen Albert in “The Garden of Forking Paths”:

Après un long silence où la dame attendait une réplique ou une réaction encourageante, je lui dis, comme dans un jeu, quelque chose de terrible, une des rares phrases dont je me souviens pour l’avoir écrite en 1941 : « Celui qui se lance dans une entreprise atroce doit s’imaginer qu’il l’a déjà réalisée, il doit s’imposer un avenir irrévocable comme le passé. »... Je la condamnais de persévérer dans son être. J’ai eu tort. (181)

Ben Jelloun not only has Borges using the words of Borges’s own character, a murderer, apparently heedlessly and out of context, but even allows him to regret them and reinterpret them in an extremely generalized fashion. If

it is not Borges speaking here, is it Ben Jelloun? Or is it Ben Jelloun who is interpreting the authorial voice of Borges in the “Garden of Forking Paths”? Whose view is it that to “persevere in one’s being” is a condemnation?

Similarly, the blind troubadour, speaking of the bâttène given him by the Arab woman, describes how he searched for a sign engraved on it, and perversely dismisses a cross he finds there as “le fait du hasard et du temps” (176). He refuses to see the import of the very sign he is looking for. Further, his explanation for the sign’s presence contradicts the philosophy of Borges in a way that is characteristic of a façade: one could say that Ben Jelloun is drawing attention to the opposite meaning by so flagrant a misinterpretation by his character. Clearly chance and time are the (Borgesian) answers to the riddle which the coin asks by its obsolescence and by the fact that it is given him by a stranger.

5.10 *Changing labyrinth of the book, elusive keys*

An all-embracing analysis of Ben Jelloun’s technique of combining enigmatic elements as a challenge to the realist expectation in literature is made in Marc Gontard’s extensive article, where he identifies the images of the “livre-labyrinthe” and the “livre-énigme” as crucial elements in Ben Jelloun’s meta-narrative in *L’Enfant de sable*.

En effet, la métaphore des murailles et des portes qui encadre la première partie de *L’Enfant de sable*, semble faire du récit le lieu d’une énigme dont la résolution est progressive. Chaque porte franchie devient, dans cette perspective, un élément d’intrigue qui se résout et qui nous entraîne vers le dénouement, celui-ci intervenant lorsque, précisément, il n’y a plus d’énigme.

Mais Ben Jelloun refuse cette conception logique du texte narratif qui va “de la nuit vers la clarté”, pour reprendre une expression du conteur, et le récit labyrinthique qui se dessine

dans les images méta-textuelles, implique un contenu cryptique.

(Gontard, 1993b, 105–6)

Gontard's interpretation takes on board this essential element of the enigma as the driving force of the narrative in unequivocal fashion. His conclusion that

La forme narrative reflète ainsi la présence active d'un mystère irrésolu comme si l'essence du récit résidait dans l'énigme et non dans la solution ... (106)

gives full justice to Ben Jelloun's insistence on the primacy of the enigmatic as the defining force behind his writing and behind his concept of writing per se. Indeed, one would probably have to resort to metaphysical argument in order to refute a general supposition that in literary terms "l'essence du récit réside dans l'énigme". Is it not the mystery of the tale what leads the reader on from page to page, book to book?

Later the narrator of *L'Enfant de sable* becomes entangled in the labyrinthine nature of the plot he has created, in the form of a recurring dream:

Je me mets à courir derrière elle et me trouve dans une grande maison où les chambres communiquent, ensuite, juste avant de sortir de la maison, et c'est là que les désagréments commencent, elle s'arrête et me laisse approcher d'elle, quand j'arrive à presque l'attraper, je constate que c'est quelqu'un d'autre, un homme travesti ou un soldat ivre. Quand je veux quitter la maison qui est un labyrinthe, je me trouve dans une vallée, puis dans un marécage, puis dans une plaine entourée de miroirs, ainsi de suite à l'infini. (183)

The narrator experiences the simultaneous play of several possible plots, as in *The Garden of Forking Paths* (the volume which is the subject of Borges's story of the same name), and this is reinforced also by the labyrinthine

nature of the house with the connecting rooms. The image of the plain surrounded by mirrors is an interesting variation on the labyrinth, exploring the remote possibilities of the labyrinth concept, just as *The Garden of Forking Paths* embodies all possibilities. Where the perception of the mirrors leads one astray as the confrontation with one's creations perturbs the creator, blindness, on the other hand (Borges went blind late in life), frees the creator from his own deceptive fictions, and is "une libération, une solitude propice aux inventions, une clef et un algèbre" (187). However, the blind troubadour grapples unsuccessfully with the keys left by his visitor:

J'ai essayé de déchiffrer un ordre secret en relation avec les sept clés, l'horloge et la pièce de monnaie. Je ne pense pas avoir trouvé le chemin du dénouement. Cependant la dernière pièce qu'elle me livra n'est pas un objet mais le récit d'un rêve qui commence par un poème qu'elle attribue à Firdoussi qui vécut au X^e siècle. ...

Dans ce corps clos, il est un visage éteint,
une blessure, une ombre, et un tumulte,
un corps dissimulé dans un autre corps. . . (190)

The poem is one of three works of fiction mentioned in the preceding two pages, each purportedly having some bearing on the enigma, this one extremely pertinent to Ahmed's story. Ben Jelloun's inclusion of known fictional works in the narrative has a similar effect to his use of known authors—it is an expansion of his exploration of the nature of the fictional. As we can see from this passage, the blind troubadour perceives a puzzle made for his benefit by the visitor, but the clues are useless in his search for the solution. What he fails to realize is his own position in relation to the enigma: as a fictional character he cannot solve a dilemma concerning fiction—and the distinguishing feature of Ben Jelloun's characters is that they all act entirely within their fictional status.

The first narrator also experiences difficulty controlling the story; it alters during the telling of it:

Bab El Had, comme son nom l'indique, c'est la porte limite, le mur qui se dresse pour mettre fin à une situation. Ce sera notre dernière porte, car elle s'est fermée sur nous sans nous prévenir. Et moi qui vous avais parlé des sept portes, je me trouve aujourd'hui dépassé. Notre histoire ne s'arrête pas à cette porte. Elle se poursuit, mais elle ne traversera plus de portes creusées dans une muraille. Elle tournera dans une rue circulaire et nous devons la suivre avec de plus en plus d'attention. (62)

In the nature of a great enigma, the answer to the puzzle appears to change as he who attempts to solve it progresses. Thus the last door closes without warning, and the story continues nevertheless. The progress of the story emphasizes the continuing ignorance of the listeners rather than what they have learned so far. Knowledge becomes redundant as it is gained. A labyrinthine analogy would be to have tried all entrances in a passage and to find the last follows a path leading to an equally large number of alternatives. But here it is already made explicit that the story is infinite, since it follows a circular path. Marc Gontard explains the narrator's loss of control over the story as an essential element of the postmodern thrust of the novel:

Ainsi note-t-on tout d'abord, dans *L'Enfant de Sable*, une sorte d'évanescence du pouvoir narratif qui subit à la fois un effritement et une dissolution. Le conteur perd en effet l'une de ses fonctions essentielles et obligatoires, la fonction de *régie*, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne maîtrise plus l'organisation du récit. (Gontard, 1993b, 116)

In response to this analysis it is necessary to consider the level of consciousness displayed by the narrator as he ostensibly loses control over the direction of the narrative. In the previous passage from *L'Enfant de sable*, the narrator seems fully aware of the nature of the events outside of his control which force him to give up the narration at this point. His method of

transferring the responsibility to an unnamed outside force can therefore be examined merely as a further technique for the creation of the enigma, and his address to the reader as an ironic misrepresentation. The fact that he no longer possesses the keys to unlock the mystery does not imply that he has not himself created it, and further, that he does not know where those keys are to be found. If we begin from the assumption that the work is itself the creation of a mystery, then the narrator is in control, even though the coherence of his narrative is not evident. He deliberately creates the mystery which is destined for the reader—all that he relinquishes is the (useless to himself) key to its resolution.

The image of the circular path is repeated several times earlier in the novel, and seems to echo the title and the content of the story “The Circular Ruins”:

Amis du Bien, sachez que nous sommes réunis par le secret du verbe dans une rue circulaire, peut-être sur un navire et pour une traversée dont je ne connais pas l'itinéraire ... (*L'Enfant de sable*, 15)

Vous avez choisi de m'écouter, alors suivez-moi jusqu'au bout... , le bout de quoi ? Les rues circulaires n'ont pas de bout !
(21)

Even the magician of “The Circular Ruins”, upon dreaming a man into existence, only to discover that he himself is being dreamed by another, has not reached the end of the puzzle:

At dawn and at twilight, he would prostrate himself before the stone figure, imagining perhaps that his unreal child was practising the same rites, in other circular ruins, downstream ...
(Borges, “The Circular Ruins,” 76)

5.11 *The reader is incorporated in the story*

Ben Jelloun makes the character of the blind troubadour (Borges) and the man in the blue turban (himself) into this magician, whose creations are the “unreal child” in this passage, and puts the reader in the place of the one who is “dreaming” the “magician”. The enigma hinges on the device of the dream, because the reader, too, dreams—and when he does he experiences the invulnerability that enlightens the magician:

He walked into the shreds of flame ... they caressed him ... without heat or combustion ... he understood that he too was mere appearance, dreamt by another ... (Borges, “The Circular Ruins,” 77)

Thus the book closes, leaving it up to the reader to reconstitute the story and its characters: “Moi, je dépose là devant vous le livre, l’encrier et les porte-plume” (*L’Enfant de sable*, 209).

Earlier Ben Jelloun links mortality and physical degeneration with Bor-
gesian preoccupations with time and mirrors:

... une dégénérescence physique avec cependant le corps dans son image intacte, car la souffrance vient d’un fond qui ne peut non plus être révélé; on ne sait pas s’il est en soi ou ailleurs, dans un cimetière, dans une tombe à peine creusée, à peine habitée par une chair flétrie, par l’œil funeste d’une œuvre singulière désintégrée au contact de l’intimité engluée de cette vérité telle une abeille dans un bocal de miel, prisonnière de ses illusions, condamnée à mourir, étranglée, étouffée par la vie. Cette vérité, banale, somme toute, défait le temps et le visage, me tend un miroir où je ne peux me regarder sans être troublé par une profonde tristesse ... Le miroir est devenu le chemin par lequel mon corps aboutit à cet état, où il s’écrase dans la terre, creuse une tombe provisoire ... Alors, j’évite les miroirs. (43–4)

The first sentence (19 lines total in the Seuil edition) is a good example of Ben Jelloun's characteristic technique of juxtaposition of philosophic terms with tactile, physical description. There is the idea of undoing time, (see "A New Refutation of Time", in which is presented the idea that we can have no claim to either sequentiality or contemporaneity in our conception of time, nor of equal divisions of it) and there are the troubling mirrors of "The Mirror of Enigmas" which discusses St. Paul's verse in I Corinthians, 13 : 12, "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem" and its various translations: "Now we see in a mirror, in darkness, but later we shall see face to face"—de Valera; "We now see in an enigma by means of a mirror"—Bloy. Where Borges's preoccupation would seem to be confrontation with some God (implicit in St. Paul's verse), Ben Jelloun's concern—disturbingly unified in the above passage—is the enigma of the creator, his work and his audience.

Conclusion

Tahar Ben Jelloun approaches storytelling in particular, and fiction in general, as implicitly involving the creation of a puzzle, the elaboration of a sense of enigma. This seems to be part of a logical progression which results from his refusal to accept even a pretence of self-resolution in his texts. In Ben Jelloun's fictional scheme, any generative act implies both a response to, and the creation of, an insoluble mystery, and there is no honest way of preventing this enigmatic nature from making itself felt in the work. The author speaks openly and self-consciously about the puzzle which can only be solved through the text, but his words are tantalizing and mocking, for the enigma really is just that, and any suggestion of a resolution is necessarily erroneous, for each new discourse creates a new mystery. Ben Jelloun's characters experience their struggle for identity as the struggle against the enigma of their existence. Their lives are often based on an impossible premise, and their attempt at resolving the crises

engendered by the impossible situations in which they are placed more often than not engenders greater crises.

6. THE STORYTELLER AND THE WITCH

This chapter will explore the roles of the storyteller and the witch in Tahar Ben Jelloun's works. Such characters have an influence over the path of the narrative in a way which identifies them closely with the narrator and the implied author. We shall see that Ben Jelloun interprets the function of these characters in the work as analogous to that of the narrator and implied author, and that the element of magic is bound up with the act of fictional creation, in the oral and in the literary sense.

I have chosen to focus on two novels with quite different narrative techniques to examine this aspect of Ben Jelloun's writing. *La Nuit sacrée* develops in an unusually conventional way (by Tahar Ben Jelloun's standards) in terms of narrative point of view, while still eventually coming up against the same issues arising out of the nature of storytelling—which issues are pervasive in Ben Jelloun's other novels. *La Prière de l'absent* is more challenging in narrative terms, and therefore more typical of Ben Jelloun's novels. However, in both works the concept of magic intrudes upon the narrative and forces the confrontation with concepts of storytelling, especially in what storytelling implies as far as control, power and knowledge are concerned.

The chapter begins with an examination of the role of the narrator, the conflicts between the narrator and storyteller, and the ambiguities which confuse these two roles or cause them to be combined. We then see what the added element of magic contributes to this ambiguity, and how the figure of the witch informs the roles of narrator and storyteller. Ultimately we see what this interaction demonstrates about who is in control of the work, and to what extent they are in control.

6.1 Narrator employs storytelling

In *La Nuit sacrée* the role of narrator and storyteller becomes confused when the narrator herself appears as a storyteller in her story. This storyteller figure encounters other storytellers on her journey. Communication between the narrator of *La Nuit sacrée* and the storytellers she encounters is decidedly one-way, with the narrator apparently unable to participate in an exchange. One could say that there is a negotiation of authority going on, with only one agent allowed responsibility for the “narrative” at any moment. When the storyteller interrupts the narrative with her own, the narrator is placed on hold until there is a break in the story, and is unable even to respond to the questions of the storyteller. She is able, however, to assume the role of storyteller on top of her role as narrator, addressing the crowd with her story directly. The crowd has gathered around her while she slept, and we have the impression that she is herself the storyteller who questioned her:

Je résolu de leur dire quelques mots pour ne pas les décevoir
totalement.

— Amis ! La nuit s’est prolongée derrière mes paupières. ...
Je suis là depuis hier, poussée par le vent, consciente d’être ar-
rivée à la dernière porte ... (*La Nuit sacrée*, 19)

In a further development the narrator recalls her father’s telling of her own story to her during the “Nuit du Destin”, when the narrator herself was nineteen years old. In this “confession” the narrator essentially creates a storyteller in the personage of her father based on her recollection of that night. We see a confrontation between the authority of the father and the authority of the narrator which was established but not explicitly evoked in *L’Enfant de sable*. Zahra is here in control of her story and is able to evoke that part of her father’s discourse which “settles” the issues raised by his manipulation of her life, and effectively of her story.

— Vingt ans de mensonge, et le pire c'est moi qui mentais, toi tu n'y es pour rien, pour rien ou presque. ... J'avoue aujourd'hui avoir eu des envies de meurtre. (23–24)

In this “confession” we see the responsibility for Zahra’s story in *L’Enfant de sable* placed entirely on the shoulders of her father, with even her role as eventual co-conspirator significantly diminished. Her father’s creation of the story is depicted by himself as furtive and sacrilegious:

Quand il m’arrivait d’aller à la mosquée, au lieu de faire l’une des cinq prières, je me mettais à élaborer des plans très compliqués pour sortir de cette situation où personne n’était heureux. Et le fait d’avoir des pensées mauvaises dans un lieu sacré, lieu de vertu et de paix, m’excitait. (24)

This negative attitude to the genesis of the story which brought Zahra into existence in *La Nuit sacrée* provides something akin to a paradigm shift across the two works in question. The current narrative gains the impression of authenticity and objectivity from the control which the narrator appears to have over the provider of the original story. By contrast, *L’Enfant de sable* comes across as a confused mix of conflicting stories, none of which has any authority over the others. The recollection of the ritual “Nuit du Destin” provides the window which allows the protagonist this objective view of her story and facilitates her control over it as the narrator.

In fact, it is the very recognition of her feminine nature by her father which allows her this control. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, she is recognized by her co-creator as that which she desires to be—a woman: “Redevenue femme, du moins reconnue comme telle par le géniteur” (34), no longer reliant on the privileges which her phony status accorded her; secondly, her father, as the author of her destiny by the creation of that conceit, has admitted his role frankly and delineated to her *the process of the creation of the story*. In other words, he has revealed to her the intrigue, the plot of her own story. This not only releases her from the mystery of

the story, so that she is no longer in thrall to this fiction in which she played her part, but she may now legitimately take over the role of author of the story in which she is nevertheless still a character. Nothing remains hidden from her any longer.

The assumption of the role of storyteller proper by the narrator of *La Prière de l'absent* in prison is treated as the end of the circle begun by her father's deception in *L'Enfant de sable*. Her position of official public writer and secretary, and the uniform associated with that, set her apart as much from the other prisoners as she already was from the prison staff. Once again she is an outcast masquerading as a figure of relative privilege.

... je devais porter la tenue réglementaire ; veste et pantalon gris, chemise bleue, cravate noire, casquette bleu marine, chaussures noires. ... J'étais de nouveau en costume d'homme. ... Certains, peut-être sans l'avoir fait exprès, m'appelèrent « monsieur ». Je ne les rectifiais pas. ... On m'accordait quelques privilèges. Je n'étais pas considérée comme une détenue à part entière ni une fonctionnaire de l'administration comme les autres. (175–6)

Zahra's new storytelling career—which takes off from the natural progression of public writing to public reading of newspapers to the prisoners—is thus another manifestation of her masquerade. For any creation or transmission of a story is in some sense a charade—Zahra's charade has merely become transparent: she is now a parody. Note that in ironic contrast with the male uniform she overdoes her makeup: “Je prenais soin de mon visage. Je me maquillais plus qu'avant. J'étais devenue coquette” (175). Ironically this appearance of shamming is in the spirit of honesty; Zahra has relinquished the temptation to play-act: “Moi je n'avais plus le cœur à jouer [sur l'apparence]” (176). This dichotomy of gender appearances Zahra experiences as a bodily affront, with frightening psychological implications.

... mon corps s'était arrêté dans son évolution... ni un corps de femme pleine et avide, ni un corps d'homme serein et fort ; j'étais entre les deux, c'est-à-dire en enfer. (178)

As a storyteller Zahra tells essentially her own story over and over, in a further confirmation that the roles of storyteller and narrator are utterly confused: "Je racontais toujours la même histoire, celle de deux êtres s'aimant dans le risque et le danger de la clandestinité" (176). There is an element of confusion with the author, too.

J'inventais au fur et à mesure que j'avais. Le schéma était toujours le même : un amour impossible s'achevant dans le sang. J'avais du plaisir à créer et imaginer des personnages et des situations. (176)

It is apparent that this passage is immediately applicable to the implied author, and especially to his creation of the two works *L'Enfant de sable* and its sequel *La Nuit sacrée*. For although these are two versions of the same story and told from very different points of view, the story is essentially the same.

Her proclivity for invention is a trait which was in a sense thrust upon her, through the Consul's reception of the fable-like characteristics of her true story. Zahra's influence over the reception of her telling of her past is severely limited. When she comes to speak to the Consul of her old life he greets the revelations light-heartedly:

Mon histoire le fit sourire. Pour lui, c'était un conte que j'avais inventé pour traverser les vingt premières années de la vie, une histoire sortie de l'imagination d'un enfant qui devait s'ennuyer et qui avait préféré s'engager dans le jeu entre le sérieux et le rire. (133)

Ironically, it is her attempt to be honest with the consul which engenders this disbelieving response. The fantastic aspect of her life is precisely that

which she had once invented—the conceit of her assumed gender. And the Consul himself reveals clues about the implied author as he shows some insight into this fact. His reception of this story is also enlightening with regard to the blurred line between living and the telling of stories:

Si ce que vous m'avez raconté est réellement arrivé, alors vous avez dû vous amuser beaucoup. ... Jouer si subtilement sur deux tableaux est une chance. ... Jouer n'est pas tromper, mais révéler les vertus de l'obscur. ... Cela nous ramène à nos poètes mystiques pour qui l'apparence était le masque le plus pervers de la vérité. (133–4)

In the development of Zahra's storytelling we can see that invention and fabulation are in fact compulsive, that even the "truth" will be received with incredulity, while likewise the fabulous will be demanded and believed in. In the world of Ben Jelloun's novels, the characters invent themselves as they go along, telling their stories almost in default of their author.

6.2 *Narrator's self-definition as a character*

The bulk of the narration of *La Nuit sacrée* eventually falls back into what we may term a more traditional form, where the identity of the narrator and the reliability of the narration is not called into question. Having established her credibility by the strategic means we have touched on in this chapter, Zahra describes the development of her new identity through the form we might traditionally call "character development", with the problematic of narrator identity and responsibility treated at best in a metaphorical fashion. Thus the experiences (Zahra uses the term "péripiétie" (80)) which Zahra undergoes directly inform her development as a character and as narrator; the reader is well prepared for this development by the use of this technique in the bulk of novels written up until our era and he is not surprised by this. The narrator speaks frankly to the reader about her psychological development as such, for example:

Je luttai en silence, sans rien laisser apparaître, pour sortir une fois pour toutes de ce labyrinthe malsain. Je me battais contre la culpabilité, contre la religion, contre la morale, contre les choses qui menaçaient de resurgir, comme pour me compromettre, me salir, me trahir et démolir le peu que j'essayais de sauvegarder dans mon être. (85)

From a narratological perspective, this transparency makes the greater part of *La Nuit sacrée* less interesting to analyze but it serves to illustrate the culmination of the development implied by the overt conflict between the storyteller and the narrator at the opening of *La Nuit sacrée*. At the moment of her entry into the home of the Consul, Zahra's narration is "stable" and her development as a character can proceed, uninterrupted by capricious storytellers. The implications for her destiny are manifold, however, as she is subject to the inescapable whims of her fellow characters, without the possibility of refuge in myth or the disputes of conflicting narrators.

Since the structure of the narrative remains conventional, Ben Jelloun must resort to an allegorical technique to approach the conflict between the narrator and storyteller. The consul tells Zahra a fantastic story about an imaginary land, where a company employs women to memorize a work of fiction each and hires them out to tell the story. In this scenario the context of the work of fiction is re-set to that of a story which is *told*, rather than *read*, so that the role of the narrator is therefore confounded with that of the storyteller, and, as we see from the following passage, the role of the book itself is confounded with that of the narrator, and, by extension, that of the characters.

On me fit payer un ticket à l'entrée. Une femme d'un certain âge était assise sur un sofa. ... Quand je m'approchais d'elle, elle me dit : « Je suis *Risalat al-Ghufran*, Épître du pardon, un livre fondamental que peu de gens ont vraiment lu, j'ai été écrit en l'an 1033, et mon créateur était né à Ma'rat al-Nu'man, ... » (98)

This identification of the author with the Creator engenders the inevitable debate over the sanctity of the text and the concept of heresy, which we hear through an old man who warns the Consul:

« C'est un sacrilège de s'identifier à un œuvre. ... Moi, je ne suis qu'un lecteur, un pauvre lecteur du Coran... Vous vous imaginez quelle hérésie je commettrais en me prenant pour le Livre saint... Autant rendre les clés du monde et s'adonner à la folie totale... Cela dit si vous avez besoin de quelqu'un pour lire quelques versets sur la tombe de vos parents, je suis votre homme... » (98-9)

The element of hypocrisy which creeps into the old man's warning accentuates the confusion over the issues surrounding a hierarchy in the domain of the creator and his work. The old man condemns one type of vicariousness while encouraging another. It seems as if by this hypocrisy Ben Jelloun would have us infer the converse of what the old man tries to convey to the Consul: namely, that since it seems acceptable to hire a third party to read your prayers to your dead loved ones, why should it not be possible to take oneself for the Koran, assuming that one has memorized it?

This example highlights the point that Ben Jelloun's narrators assume as much authority as may be imagined over the development of their story. That is, whatever they can imagine themselves to be as a character, this seems to be possible within the bounds of Ben Jelloun's work. Even when the narration takes a conventional form, the narrators can be seen to be creating their own story as an author would. The boundaries between what we conceive to be the character, the narrator, the author and the work are apparently flexible; indeed, our very ideas of these boundaries are played upon by the narrator herself.

6.3 Narrator discovers her power

The narrator's discovery of her magical powers has implications for the narrative structure and the development of the narrator's ability to control her story. The narrator of *La Nuit sacrée* begins to discover her power through the revelations of L'Assise, who asks how she has managed to transform the Consul's state of mind by her mere presence:

— Je veux savoir. J'insiste. Qui es-tu ? Que transportes-tu en toi de miraculeux ? Comment as-tu réussi à redonner vie à un mourant ? (*La Nuit sacrée*, 104)

Once again, as in *La Prière de l'absent*, the protagonist's power is unknown to her until it is pointed out by another character, that is, by an outside presence. The implication of this is that the mere fact of the story implies the inevitability of discovering clues about one's role in that story. Once her power is made apparent to her in this way, and her role as a witch is described to her, her narrative role changes also. Not long afterwards she becomes dimly aware of her environment as resembling a story, and of the necessity of examining it as such in order to understand it:

Tout ne serait peut-être que jeu, où la vie serait un accessoire, un élément folklorique. L'Assise serait une manipulatrice professionnelle, le Consul, un pervers déguisé en aveugle et moi je serais la proie idéale... j'avais trop vécu dans le mensonge et le simulacre pour ne pas me rendre compte que j'étais impliquée dans une étrange affaire... Il fallait vérifier l'état des lieux et des personnages. (115)

The way she expresses the fantastic characteristics of her situation is rather how we would imagine a person expressing disbelief in the plausibility of a situation in "real life", perhaps during an ordinary conversation with a friend. One suggests that it seems as if the real and the imaginary have

changed places (hence the cliché “truth is stranger than fiction”). This is in contrast to Ben Jelloun’s narrators in other works who, faced with a fantastic situation, very quickly come to a correct conclusion about their place in the novel, with the implication that “reality” is beyond their grasp. Zahra is still far from this point, merely leaping to another false conclusion which is part of her illusion of a real life. The narrator takes this approach in order to be able to control the reality she encounters. This reality takes on such a fantastic aspect that treating the place and the people as fictional is the only way to conceptualize the situation. The unusual mixture of judicial and dramatic terminology inherent in the expression “vérifier l’état des lieux et des personnages” testifies to her desire to take stock of her situation through a redefinition of her surroundings.

Ben Jelloun’s use of the concept of magical power is a transcendent device which implies the malleability of fictional space and fictional lives. We are used to thinking that a work of fiction implies magic, the creation of appearances which fool us into believing they are not mere simulacra. For Ben Jelloun, magic implies fiction: the fact of the concept of magic and the belief in it presuppose the credulity which makes fiction possible, and which makes those which we can imagine possible in fiction.

6.4 *Storyteller versus narrator*

La Nuit sacrée represents a conscious transferral of narrative role between one work and another, and therefore shows the importance of the perceived identity of the narrator to the reader’s interpretation of the text. As it becomes apparent at the opening of *La Nuit sacrée*, the main character of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s previous novel *L’Enfant de sable* returns to tell her side of the story.

Mais comme ma vie n’est pas un conte, j’ai tenu à rétablir les faits et à vous livrer le secret gardé sous une pierre noire dans une maison aux murs hauts au fond d’une ruelle fermée par sept

portes. (*La Nuit sacrée*, 7)

The later novel covers what we understand to be the same chronological period but, as we find consistently in Ben Jelloun's work, a change in narrator entails a change in the actual events reported in the narrative. Such startling discrepancies are illustrated within the text of *L'Enfant de sable* itself, where a number of storytellers, including a traditional storyteller of the sort found in Moroccan town squares, vie for authority in the telling of Ahmed's (Zahra's) story.¹

Although *La Nuit sacrée* represents a return to the more subjective unbroken first-person narrative, Zahra announces herself as another storyteller, thus retaining the authority of a "testimony", rather than allowing the initial implication of a fictionalization. In the first chapter, or "Préambule", the narrator begins, "Ce qui importe c'est la vérité" (5), and continues by specifying the oral character of her testimony: "Je vais parler, déposer les mots et le temps" (5). Her role as storyteller means that she must speak even of herself in the third person:

Ceux qui se sont risqués à raconter la vie de cet enfant de sable
et de vent ont eu quelques ennuis : certains ont été frappés
d'amnésie ; d'autres ont failli perdre leur âme. (6)

This passage continues with an ironic phrase which underlines the intent of the narrator in establishing her authority in the telling of her story: "On vous a raconté des histoires" (6). This phrase, in which telling stories is synonymous with lying pure and simple, is a succinct presentation of Ben Jelloun's approach to the philosophy of fiction. Fiction is about telling stories, and it is about telling tales. Each of his narrators must be held suspect, and although "ce qui importe c'est la vérité", this truth will only come out inadvertently, if at all, for all that can be written or told is a fiction. (We

¹ Mustapha Marrouchi illustrates the effect of this succinctly when he writes: "no less than six storytellers share in recounting the story, which for this reason becomes allergic to itself in the end by virtue of its display of its own fictional essence" (Marrouchi, 72).

shall see that one of the few elements which lends authenticity to a narrative is the perceived madness of the narrator, and thus the unconsciousness of his production of the story.)

It is apparent that the storyteller Bouchaïb's audience maintains strong suspicions about the authenticity of his story, in a suggestion of the narrative uncertainty we have already encountered: "Certains n'étaient plus sous le charme. Ils doutaient. Ils n'aimaient pas ces silences faits d'absence et d'attente" (9).

There are other facets to this distinctive rejection of the storyteller by his audience. It is manifested in the apparent hallucination by some among them of a camel-rider who makes a gesture of rejection to the storyteller:

Il parlait à quelqu'un, invisible, ... Certains imaginaient un vieillard sur un chameau faisant un geste de la main pour ne pas entendre le conteur. (10)

A couple leaves the circle of listeners—an unheard-of event ("Jamais on ne quittait le cercle de Bouchaïb" (10))—in a symbolic breaking of the implicit pact between the storyteller and his listeners. The effect upon the storyteller is profound:

« Libre à ces gens de partir, se disait-il ; ma tristesse n'a plus de fond ; elle s'est transformée en un sac de pierres que je porterais jusqu'à ma tombe ! » (10)

This disintegration of the storyteller's authority, coming as it does in the introductory phase of *La Nuit sacrée*, presages the depiction of an ongoing struggle between the figures of storyteller and narrator in the work. *La Nuit sacrée* is founded on the theoretical confrontation between the storytellers of *L'Enfant de sable* and the narrator of *La Nuit sacrée*.

Indeed, at this point a tentative physical confrontation occurs between this new first-person incarnation of Ahmed-Zahra and the storyteller himself. In explaining her presence there, Zahra casually remarks: "Je savais

trop de choses et ma présence dans ce lieu n'était pas le fait du hasard" (11). This phrase seems an uncanny echo of the blind troubadour's dismissal of the significance of the cross etched in the battène as "le fait du hasard et du temps" towards the close of *L'Enfant de sable* (176). It is also a contradictory echo—Zahra's story is *not* the web of conflicting narratives that Ahmed's is in *L'Enfant de sable*, therefore her presence is *not* "le fait du hasard." In *La Nuit sacrée* Zahra takes back her story, reappropriates it, setting to rights the inversion of narrative hierarchies that *L'Enfant de sable* represents. The storyteller and Zahra's tentative meeting carries the mystery of this struggle between two mutually incompatible modes of discourse.

Nos regards se croisèrent. Ses yeux brillaient de cette intelligence qui suscite la peur. C'était un regard affolé, possédé par l'indéfinissable. Il était suspendu. Il reconnut en moi le spectre d'une époque d'infortune. Les mains derrière le dos, il tournait en rond. Moi, j'étais calme ; j'attendais avec la patience des sages. (*La Nuit sacrée* 11)

There seems to be some invisible barrier separating the narrator from the storyteller. The narrator's encounter with another storyteller is equally ephemeral:

Elle me regarde, médusée, puis me dit :

— D'où viens-tu, toi qui ne dis rien ?

Sans attendre de réponse elle s'en alla puis disparut. (19)

The apparent conflict between the figure of the storyteller and the narrator belies Ben Jelloun's manipulation of our concept of the roles which these two figures play in our understanding of the text. They meet on the same plane, as it were, but are often unable to interact; yet they often exchange roles—the storyteller inventing the plot and the narrator making up stories which do not fit the plot. For Ben Jelloun the very concept of these

roles is material for the construction of the fiction, material to which, by implication, not only the author has access, but the narrator, the storyteller, the characters also.

6.5 *Storytellers struggle for control*

The process of negotiation between storytellers can even enter the realm of physical struggle, ultimately determined by life and death. We see this particularly in the confrontation between the narrator and her father in *La Nuit sacrée*, when there is a physical attempt by the father to prevent her leaving his bedside. This amounts to a last-ditch attempt by the “creator” of the original story to retake control over the new narration:

Au moment où je m’apprêtais à me lever, il s’agrippa à mon bras. Du fond de son sommeil il me retenait. J’étais de nouveau prisonnière d’un de ses plans. (29)

The details of this confrontation are interesting in the light they shed on the process of negotiating the role of storytelling/narration from one character to another. For instance, we have clues that, at the moment death approaches, Zahra’s father is consciously trying to alter his role from an inventor of stories to a character in one. He experiences waking hallucinations on his death-bed:

Je suis lucide, je n’invente rien. Je vois ton visage auréolé d’une lumière extraordinaire. Tu viens de naître, cette nuit, la vingt-septième. . . . La Nuit du Destin te nomme Zahra, . . . C’est toi que je vois, c’est ta main qui se tend, ah ! ma fille, tu me prends avec toi. . . mais où m’emmènes-tu ? (32)

Her father’s utterances at this point imply that he senses the responsibility for the story passing to the personified “Nuit du Destin”. Suddenly it is the night itself which has the power of naming and recreating the character in

a different aspect. He is, however, the revealer of her destiny—once again the narrator is somehow dependent on the other characters of the story for the definition of her role. He says, “Je n’invente rien”: he has ceased to be a narrator, but it is not Zahra who stands at his bedside who is leading him, it is his fantasy, which he creates for Zahra. His death-hallucination is his last act of fictional creation.

The Consul’s farewell inaugurates the by now inevitable reestablishment of the narrator’s control over her characters. However, this is conveyed within the fictional construction of the frame of Zahra’s dreams—it is the vocabulary which makes this metaphor transparent.

... mes nuits ressemblaient de plus en plus à un déménagement ; elles se vidaient de plus en plus de leurs locataires douteux, souvent monstrueux. Tous les personnages que j’avais accumulés durant ma vie étaient priés de quitter les lieux. ... Dès que je fermais l’œil je les voyais débarquer comme des fantômes descendant d’un train en plein brouillard. (174)

Not only are the people in her dreams clearly labelled “personnages” but her impression of their sending-off is obviously a self-conscious fictional construction—straight out of a spy film.

The implications of Ben Jelloun’s fictional space, in which the fictional nature of the work becomes so readily apparent to the figures in the work, are that a thinly-veiled battle for control takes place, played out, as here, in symbols of dreams and hallucinations, but also in direct references to the book and the roles of its various figures, and in physical confrontations between them.

6.6 *Escaping the role of character*

The conflict between the roles of character and storyteller is expressed as an internal struggle in the consciousness of the character Zahra in *La Nuit sacrée*. The role of character is interpreted by her as a limitation on her

freedom from which she struggles to free herself. The following passage testifies to Zahra's role as storyteller as well as her entrenched position as a character in a drama over which she has no control:

Je n'étais plus un être de sable et de poussière à l'identité incertaine, s'effritant au moindre coup de vent. Je sentais se solidifier, se consolider, chacun de mes membres. Je n'étais plus cet être de vent dont toute la peau n'était qu'un masque, une illusion faite pour tromper une société sans vergogne, basée sur l'hypocrisie, les mythes d'une religion détournée, vidée de sa spiritualité... Hélas ! ce bonheur, cette plénitude, cette découverte de soi dans le regard sublime d'un aveugle n'allait pas durer. ... Ce bonheur bref mais intense allait être brutalement interrompu. (138)

Here Zahra still keeps hold of both roles tenaciously, playing the part of the storyteller even to the point of foreshadowing coming events in the work, but in the same breath declaring herself unable to resist the misfortune which the story has in store for her: "je n'avais plus la force de me rebeller" (138). This is the revenge which the work brings to bear upon her for her presumption in seeking out for herself earthly satisfaction in a world she only half understands, indeed, a world she has deliberately set out to forget: "Il m'avait fallu l'oubli, l'errance et la grâce distillée par l'amour, pour renaître et vivre" (138). Instead of seeking to understand what has befallen her and the knowledge that gives her of the world, she actively seeks to unlearn what she has learned, to forget and to live in a fantastic paradise of her own imagining.

The reader obtains a clue as to Ben Jelloun's intentions with the account of Zahra's reading in prison. In this passage we have an ironic reference to the author's role and at the same time an outline of the nature of Zahra's presumption as a character attempting to influence the story. Once again, the distinction between reader and character is blurred, with one taking on aspects of the other.

Je ne pouvais m'empêcher de faire des projections sur tous les personnages des récits que je lisais. Je leur bandais les yeux systématiquement ou je les envoyais en prison pour homicide volontaire avec préméditation. ... Il m'arrivait même de transférer un personnage d'une histoire à une autre. Cela m'amusait et me permettait d'agir un peu. (145)

Zahra's own fate seems to be subject to the whims of an author intent on punishing her for the crimes of another, and indeed she ends up in prison in large measure because of the scheming of other characters in the work, that is, through the insistence of other characters that they control her story. Specifically, l'Assise suspects Zahra's life to be a fiction, and sets about imposing her own reality on it by tracking down Zahra's uncle and bringing him to her. Ironically, it is her new life which is the more genuine, not being based on the construction of a false gender, and it is the naïvety of Zahra's insistence on this new reality which makes her vulnerable to attack.

Notions of fictional character and narrator are used by Ben Jelloun as devices in the drama which his characters play out. Zahra's attempt to escape her essential dependence as a character is existential in nature—she is unprepared for the consequences of her rebellion, but feels compelled to rebel in any case. This testifies to her latent awareness of her role and its limitations and of the relative freedom offered by the other roles which she may take up.

6.7 *Midwife as storyteller*

It should not be surprising, especially given the traditional importance of midwives in most cultures and the reverence (and, conversely, suspicion) in which they are commonly held, that this figure should assume the role of creator by proxy at the moment of the birth. In *La Prière de l'absent* Ben Jelloun portrays the midwife Lalla Radhia in this way, as well as imbuing

her character with magical qualities. The midwife's role in Ben Jelloun's works brings her into competition with the storyteller and the narrator. This in turn is used as a transcendental type of symbolism, in which the suggested real-life magical power of a midwife lends more credence to the idea of the characters' attempt to escape their fictional space. On the surface, she has real magical powers over life and death—a notion which speaks to the reader's sense of vulnerability—while at the same time her use of language strongly suggests authorship. She is at once a portrayal of a magical figure from real life, and an actual co-creator of the story in the context of the novel.

Lalla Radhia's impassive temperament (she is "calme et résignée" (25)) during the birth which is described, and the instantaneous effect of her invocations and medicines, combine with the rich symbolism of the passage to raise her apparent status almost to that of a saint.

Lalla Radhia quitte la fontaine, retrousse ses manches et fait signe de la tête à son assistante qui la suit. ... La femme s'accroche à elle comme aux branches d'un arbre et tire sur ses vêtements. ...

Commence alors une série d'invocations. ...

Ô Envoyé de Dieu

Viens au secours de cette femme enceinte

Ô mon Dieu ! ...

Amis les anges

Montrez-nous le visage de l'absent !

(*La Prière de l'absent*, 25)

The imagery of the fountain (echoed later in "nommer le lieu et la fontaine de la naissance" (41)) and of the tree contributes to emphasizing Lalla Radhia's role as creator, while her invocation of the face of the eponymous "absent" identifies her with the implied author; an identification which is soon strengthened by the appearance of another midwife figure, Lalla Ma-

lika, the child's grandmother, who seems to guide his entry into the world through his very thoughts in the womb:

Il trouva le miroir et l'interrogea :

— Mais qui suis-je ? Je veux être, exister, être palpable, avoir une figure, des mains, un corps... Mais où suis-je ? Où est la lumière de ma naissance ?

La voix de Lalla Malika, grand-mère et sage-femme répondit :

Ne sois pas impatient mon enfant. Laisse la lumière entrer avec douceur. ... Je te dirai le mouvement de ta naissance. ... Débarrasse-toi de l'autre que tu fus.

(39)

Her language gives the impression of a storyteller breathing life into a character. We are informed that the voice of Lalla Malika had “traversé un siècle”—she is speaking from the grave, where she lies “sans linceul” (37), at her own request. This ritual aberration, this insistence on individuality, also set her apart from the other characters and make of the midwife-figure something magical and authoritative—a creative figure. In the same passage her large hands are emphasized as “des mains ayant fait le pain et donné la vie” (37).

Lalla Malika's role in the genesis of the child in *La Prière de l'absent* becomes inextricably linked with her own role as storyteller, as she begins her story, which is the history of the liberation of Morocco as well as the story of the child's past life, and which provides the child with his *raison d'être* (39). Yamna implies that Lalla Malika is a witch in rejecting that role for herself, while simultaneously attributing the actual writing of the book to her:

Attention, Sindibad, je ne suis pas une sorcière ou le produit d'un cauchemar. ... Nous avons été désignés par la source, par

l'arbre et les mains de la sage-femme, Lalla Malika, pour écrire ce livre, pour remplir toutes ces pages. (56)

Through some undefined magical power, Lalla Malika has compulsively delegated the writing of the novel itself to these characters. It seems to be understood that the "livre" she mentions is the work *La Prière de l'absent*, and she hints that "il est l'histoire que nous vivons déjà" (57), although later we discover that the book referred to is the baby himself (see Section 7.7, page 201). Naturally, the less enlightened characters are somewhat mystified at this point, as Sindibad exclaims: "Mais tu te moques de nous ! Tu sais bien que ni Boby ni moi ne savons lire et écrire" (56). The subtext here is that their illiteracy prevents them from being aware that they are in a novel. For their benefit the child is used by Yamna as a symbol for the creative role they are compelled to undertake, and the journey is provided as an expression of the path of their story. Thus the book becomes a path of self-discovery for which they are manifestly unprepared.

The thoughts of the child himself interpret the midwife's function with an unexpected eloquence and self-awareness. This eloquence and understanding make the importance of storytelling distinct from the importance of merely *knowing*:

Nommer la mort des uns et des autres. Anonymes. ... dessiner les formes subtiles et changeantes du corps pour mieux détruire, pour en finir avec la charge lourde du passé. ... Il comprit que seul le récit de son histoire pouvait le laver de cette emprise, le détacher définitivement de ces liens. (41)

The storyteller performs both a purgative and a healing function, recounting the story in the sense of revisiting the events with which the child is already familiar, since he seems to recall perfectly his previous life, and thereby aiding him to forget it. The telling of the story acts like a literary crossing of the River Lethe.

The birth imagery of the tree and the fountain is repeated when the child is found beneath a tree which is near a spring, by another sort of storyteller and his companion (52), who are paid to read the Koran over the graves of dead relatives. The imagery draws this pair in turn into the analogy of the storyteller and the magical figure, since the spot is definitively their own, “notre vieil olivier” (50). Yamna’s declaration that the child “est né de la source à ma droite et de l’olivier à ma gauche” (54) therefore gives Sindibad and Bobby a privileged place in the genesis of the story. Nevertheless although Sindibad has authoritative characteristics, this time it is in the sense of parody only. We are told that Sindibad, a “mythomane” (47), “se donna les airs de chef et s’est inventé une vie pleine de promesses” (48). Of himself, he declares: “Je suis même un menteur professionnel” (55).

We encounter the same imagery again when the figure of the soldier Ma -al-Aynayn appears in the story which Yamna tells: “Ma -al-Aynayn n’est-il pas l’eau des yeux et de la source ?” (76). The national hero, as the main protagonist of Yamna’s story, is the water of the spring which represents the story and thereby the child, and Ma -al-Aynayn is to be “la source de l’eau qui préserve tes racines en plein désert” (76), as Yamna instructs the child.

The midwife, as the performer of the rituals of birth in the society portrayed by Ben Jelloun, partakes of the essentially collaborative creative effort which characterizes his novels. The ambiguity of her role as both a symbol of a real-life magical figure and a co-narrator contributes to the breaking-down of barriers between the fictional and the real, which barriers constantly confront Ben Jelloun’s protagonists.

6.8 *Sacrilege, mystery and the storyteller*

The idea of sacrilege, as evidenced in the intellectual experiments of the Consul, represents the infinite possibilities of the imagination, faced with the challenge of fixed forms of perception and fixed methods of recounting

a story. By implication, it also represents the revelation of mysteries, the telling of the unsayable and the forbidden.

But subversion has been an important part of modern religions' rituals since early Christian times, so its use in a subversive manner, no matter how individualistic in character, should come as no surprise. Consider the greatly influential tradition of the modern Negro spiritual:

Spirituals, Black English versions of White Christian religious sentiment, began not only as acts of religious devotion, but also as coded messages amongst an oppressed people.

*I ain't never been to heaben but I been told,
Comin' fuh to carry me home,
Dat de streets in heaben am paved wif gold,
Comin' to carry me home.*

Steal away to Jesus was an invitation to a gathering of slaves; *Judgement Day* was the day of the slave uprising; *Home, Canaan*, (the promised land) and *Heaven* were all veiled allusions to Africa. . . .

The subversive use of religious songs was just part of an understandably subversive attitude amongst speakers of Black English toward the language of their masters. . . . There were other kinds of codes used on the plantation:

Sometimes while loading corn in the field, which demands loud singing, Josh would call to Alice, a girl he wanted to court on the adjoining plantation, "I'm so hungry want a piece of bread"; and her reply would be "I'se so hungry almost dead." Then they would try to meet after dark in some secluded spot.

(McCrum et al., 219)

This analysis encompasses many aspects of this thesis under the banner of linguistic change: subversion, codes, as well as the question of who is

represented by the narrator.

In Ben Jelloun's work we see an example of this subversion of religious text in the character Sindibad's obsession with the Koran in *La Prière de l'absent*. Sindibad's personal masterpiece here is to subvert the holy work by reading it backwards:

... pour prouver sa parfaite maîtrise, il les récitait aussi en remontant de la dernière sourate à la *Fatiha*, la sourate de l'ouverture. C'était même sa coquetterie : jongler sans erreur avec la rigueur architecturale du Livre saint. (79)

Sindibad's uncanny ability is associated with madness ("La peur de perdre la raison le hantait" (79)), but also indirectly with witchcraft:

Il rédigeait des pages entières de façon mécanique, sans jamais se relire, utilisant une plume en roseau qu'il trempait dans de l'encre marron pâle, l'encre des hommes de religion, des charlatans et des sorciers. (79)

As well as associating Sindibad's ability at recitation with witchcraft, this passage draws symbolic parallels between the latter, charlatanism and conventional religion. In this obscure connection, these institutions are painted as equivalent in the way they are written down, in other words, in the way their stories are told. Having made this connection, the narrator reveals that Sindibad's work makes him into the figure of author as well as storyteller, since we hear that they are actually books which he is writing: "Il avait un grand bloc de feuilles blanches dont il ne se séparait jamais. C'était le ou les livres qu'il était en train d'écrire" (79). It seems that the functions of storyteller, witch, author and religious leaders are being categorized under the rubric "the uncanny". In simple terms, all of these figures gain their authority from the fact of being in possession of knowledge which is hidden from their subjects, and what they choose to reveal is never enough to allow a straightforward analysis of the process by

which they came upon that knowledge. In this example, Sindibad “écrivait le jour et sortait la nuit. Personne ne savait où il allait ni ce qu’il griffonnait à longueur de journée” (79). The process of his mind is as inscrutable to others as that of the witch or the founders of a religion. Even his appearance accentuates this impression: “Il ressemblait à ces personnages de contes, insaisissables, mystérieux, presque fous” (80) (See also page 198).

Later we discover that, prompted by passion for his companion Jamal, he would write mysterious phrases and symbols with coal on the walls of the town where he lived. These scrawlings, especially in their symbolism, make yet another connection between the writer, the religious adept, and the subversive cult figure (the witch).

Il laissait sur les portes des signes, des Croix du Sud, des cercles imparfaits, des triangles avec un point au milieu, des chiffres indiens, des lettres de l’alphabet grec. Il dessinait aussi un œil immense inscrit avec la paume d’une main ouverte, des mots arabes inachevés, des points d’interrogation et un peu partout le nom de Jamal. (85)

The act of leaving mysterious symbols and phrases on buildings is at once a form of imaginative expression and an exhortation to the shadowy powers over which religious leaders and cult figures claim to have various degrees of dominion. Note the deliberately puzzling nature of the “mots arabes inachevés” and the “points d’interrogation” implying a meaning which he purposely withholds, or one which is implicit in the environment. These omissions have a similar effect to the phenomenon of the characters’ occasional awareness of the context of the novel. Their references to the story and to the book are hints of a wider context in which they find themselves. Similarly, the omission of parts of words or phrases in Sindibad’s graffiti does not merely point to things he himself knows but does not reveal, but to the mysterious nature of the world itself—to the inevitability of secrets. The role of the witch and the storyteller is at the same time to reveal and to conceal these secrets.

The theme of mystery is dealt with in a straightforward manner in *La Prière de l'absent* as part of Yamna's account of the sheik Ma -al-Aynan's history. The narrative context in which this occurs amounts to a commentary on itself, but even the surface meaning recalls Borges's compulsion to undermine his own medium.

Ma -al-Aynayn raconte lui-même dans son œuvre *Na't al-bidayat* que ce mystique [Abderrahman Efendi] « recherchait le secret de la lettre H (H'a) ...et attendait de lui qu'il l'éclairât à ce sujet » ! La lettre H'a dans l'alphabet arabe est la lettre du mystère. Elle est probablement un élément dans la pratique de la magie, dans les écritures devant agir sur le Diable et éloigner le mal. (97)

The context of the statement must be recalled because this reflects the meaning of the words. Yamna is telling the story of the sheik's life to the baby (a story which is ostensibly synonymous with the baby's life), quoting the sheik's words from a book which he has published, who in turn recounts the words of the mystic Abderrahman Efendi, who asks him to explain the meaning of the letter *h'a*, a letter whose meaning is avowedly lost. Meanwhile, the story tells us the role of the letter in magic, and the determination of the mystic to learn it. The meaning of the passage is clear if we reverse the chronological procedure in our interpretation: magic produces the letter which produces the word which produces the book which produces the life. Tahar Ben Jelloun's intention to stress the mystical function of the letter is seen in his determination to print this single letter in Arab script within the Roman manuscript. (The second chapter of *La Prière de l'absent* contains similar transcriptions of the midwife's invocations (25-6, 30-1).) It is possible to dissect the context further: the mystic's words are a question with no answer, the question is entered into the book, the question is retold as a story, which forms the basis for a life; this life is then made into a book (*La Prière de l'absent* itself), which seems to query even this procedure (is Yamna's search fruitful?).

The transposition of life and book is reinforced by Sindibad's crisis as he contemplates the fate of the child in their care (see Section 7.8, page 204). In this episode Sindibad symbolically seeks to take the place of the child's life, in the form of a book: "Pourquoi va-t-on imposer la vie à cet enfant, pourquoi l'encombrer, alors qu'il est si facile de passer directement du berceau au tombeau !" (104). At Yamna's astonishment he then claims to be the very book which his stylized speech resembles. He is "un livre inachevé" (104)—in other words, an infant, like or the same as the one they are taking on their journey.

As a religious man Sindibad had confounded expectations in the severest traditions of the mystics of all the great religions, contradicting, questioning, but at all times remaining himself mysterious and inscrutable to his fellows and his teachers, deliberately choosing a path to become "un savant passionné par l'obscur, par l'incompréhensible" (80). His notoriety is met with matching incomprehension:

On parlait à son sujet de délire et de divagations hérétiques, vaguement mystiques. Lui-même se réclamait de l'esprit et de l'âme de l'Andalou Ibn 'Arabi et d'Al Hallaj. ...

— ... Il a lu beaucoup, je dirai même qu'il a lu trop de livres et je crains qu'il ne commence à tout confondre. ... ses références sont dangereuses : Les mystiques ont de tout temps détourné l'esprit de notre religion. (81)

This warning of the old sheik's to Sindibad's (Ahmad's) father presents an irony which stems from the very incomprehension Sindibad seeks. The search for an explanation for the apparently incomprehensible has always been the primary motivation for religious thought. It is the mystics of every religion who provoke incomprehension by their very perseverance in pursuing that which cannot be explained. Although this is often threatening to the hierarchy of the religion, their pursuits are more often in the true spirit of the religion than the preachers for the status quo. It is clear that Ben Jelloun wishes to associate the challenging nature of the mystical search

with the attainment of authenticity for, as we hear when Sindibad gives up on his university, in a voice we take to be the implied author's:

Il n'allait plus à la Qaraouine, ce qui arrangeait bien ses professeurs qui pouvaient enfin raconter n'importe quoi sans courir de risque d'être contredits ou confondus. (86)

This "n'importe quoi" is obviously meant to allude to the inevitable ignorance which arises in the absence of debate and challenge. Sindibad's teachers are now free to stray from the essence of their doctrine, ironically, to make up the story as they go along, but according to the whims of political expediency, rather than according to any passionately held belief.

The sacrilegious figure occupies a similar position to the magical figure in Ben Jelloun's work, the former opens up possibilities through revelation which the latter does through invocation. Both offer new ways of controlling through usurping the control of the status quo. Their opening up of possibilities similarly shows how new stories might be written with the material of the old.

6.9 Moral judgement expressed through witchcraft

The presence of the force of witchcraft makes itself felt almost subconsciously and in response to a moral dilemma. When Zahra resolves to take the Consul to the whorehouse, for example, she feels the presence of an evil eye casting a spell on the two as they walk:

Une femme regardait sans être vue. En passant près d'elle je reçus comme une flèche et j'eus un frisson. Mon corps l'avait captée comme un signe. (123–4)

This moment can be seen as a turning point where Zahra's good fortune reaches a climax and subsequently disappears. This is where Zahra's influence over the Consul is at its zenith, marked by her making love with

him in the guise of a prostitute, a kind of mutual deception where the Consul does not give voice to his suspicions about her identity either. The subsequent rapid deterioration of Zahra's fortune suggests that this transgression is essentially beyond the power of a character who is unaware of her fictional status. This experiment recasts Zahra as a prostitute, as well as giving her the tacit role of the Consul's lover. This she achieves through her own devising—she seems to usurp the author, of whom she is nevertheless unaware. She denies the unseen destiny which leads her to the Consul's house without her conscious influence, as well as her own presentiment represented by the evil eye; she experiments with materials which she still does not fully understand.

The terrible climax of the novel—the clitorisectomy forcibly performed by Zahra's sisters during her prison stay—is eventually attributed to witchcraft. The guard who is corrupted by her sisters for the purpose of this torture is later claimed to be a witch:

La voix du mourant qui m'habitait devint claire et précise :

— La gardienne est une esclave ramenée il y a longtemps du Soudan... C'est une sorcière, experte dans les méthodes de torture...

Ce fut certainement elle qui suggéra à mes sœurs de me rendre infirme et m'exclure définitivement de la vie. (163)

This statement seems in the context to be vague and indefinite, and the affirmation that the guard was a witch seems to settle the matter more easily than we might expect, coming as it does from the mouth of a character about whom Zahra merely dreams subsequently. This might lead us to conclude that it is the guard's role as the arbiter of Zahra's destiny which is clarified by the revelation of her sorcery. In other words, as a witch she is also the storyteller, possessor of an unqualified power which Zahra comes to recognize and accept only towards the end of the novel. On the other hand, Zahra's dreams later come to have some degree of authenticity, as the dream of the bodies in the shed is confirmed to some degree by the

doctor, who says it corresponds to a widely-spread rumour in the town. In this sense, then, Zahra’s dreams themselves have an aspect of sorcery about them, and we in fact witness a subtle (because undeclared) battle between shadowy sorcerers, of which Zahra is one.

Zahra herself characterizes this magic in terms of the suffering she has undergone:

Ce qui m’étonne c’est le rapport entre vos souffrances et cette histoire. . .

— Disons qu’une grande douleur me procure une lucidité au seuil de la voyance ! (165)

By implication magic is here identified with lucidity, with light in the symbolic sense. Magic is at the service of knowledge of what is hidden in terms of political conspiracy, as in this example, as well as in terms of the protagonist’s own motivations, as in the episode at the whorehouse. Conversely, the attempt to hide knowledge provokes the magic which reveals what is hidden. Magic tells the hidden story, and is in some sense bound up with all telling, since that which is not told is by implication hidden.

6.10 Magical “storytelling by proxy”

The idea of magical telling is demonstrated explicitly in *La Nuit sacrée*. A convergence of Zahra’s twin roles of storyteller and witch occurs in the confession of the Consul that, unbeknownst to her, he has been transcribing her thoughts in his bid to continue writing. This is directly related to the reparative operation Zahra undergoes in hospital, as we see in the expression which the Consul uses to explain the search for “un abri” which leads to his writing:

J’essaie d’écarter les lèvres cousues de ma mère sous terre. Entendre, ne serait-ce qu’une fois, sa voix. Pour le moment j’écris, et je dois vous l’avouer que je le fais sous votre dictée.

Ce que j'écris m'effraie et me possède. D'où tenez-vous ce pouvoir de traverser la vie en la perturbant avec arrogance, je veux dire avec courage ? ... Vos pensées traversent la vie et arrivent au petit jour. Mon rôle est de les organiser et de les transcrire. (169)

In this manner the mutilation which Zahra undergoes, with the double significance of "lèvres cousues", specifically symbolizes a kind of gagging, a forced silence (the word "mutisme" recurs in *La Nuit sacrée*). Her subsequent surgical operation symbolizes in its turn the restoration of speech, of the ability to tell one's story, and the suffering Zahra has endured gives her the power to accomplish this telling by fantastic means, through the unconscious projection of her thoughts. The Consul himself generalizes on the meaning of his experience of receiving her thoughts in this manner:

Votre histoire est terrible. Au fond, je ne sais pas si c'est votre histoire ou celle d'une conjonction qui nous dépasse tous, quelque chose qui découle en faisceaux de lumière de la Voie lactée, parce qu'il est question de lune, de destin et de déchirure du ciel. (169)

This suggests that the convergence of Zahra's roles as storyteller and witch is a transcendent phenomenon dictated by a collective will and a universal need.

The continuation of this discourse by the Consul is authorial in tone, and as such contains the kind of self-criticism and self-analysis that one would expect from an author. Phrases such as "Votre histoire est une suite de portes qui s'ouvrent sur des territoires blancs et des labyrinthes qui tournent" (169) are equally applicable to the works *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* as to the "story" of Zahra which is transmitted to the Consul. His commentary can be read as a kind of key to the reading of these works, and to the interpretation of Zahra's role in *La Nuit sacrée*. As the consul says of her: "Vous n'êtes pas de celles qui ferment une histoire. Vous seriez peut-être de celles qui la laissent ouverte en vue d'en faire un conte

infini” (169). In other words, Zahra’s role transcends the boundaries of the work, and of her own story. As a storyteller telling her own story, she may in a sense cause this story to go on forever (she will never tell its ending), and encompasses the stories of others, so that eventually the Consul is possessed by it.

Vous êtes vous-même le secret qui me possède. Je ne peux m’en délivrer qu’en allant jusqu’au bout de cette histoire. ... depuis que je suis votre voix, depuis qu’elle me mène vers des nuits enveloppées dans de la soie et tachées de sang, je suis dans l’étrange. ... Comment vous dire que pour vous atteindre je suis obligé de passer par une porte étroite ? Je vous entends et mes mains vous cherchent. (169–70)

This is not just the voice of the Consul, but also that of the implied author. The character of Zahra possesses the author, with her roles of storyteller and witch reaching out beyond the page which confines “ordinary” characters. Here the author outlines his own impressions of her power over the writing of the story. But we have already seen that Zahra differs from other narrators in her deliberate suppression, or “forgetting”, of her awareness of her narrative role and her magical power. Why then does she nevertheless exhibit both this narrative control and this subtle sorcery? It seems that Zahra’s denial has been fruitless.

... mon histoire, celle qui fit de moi un enfant de sable et de vent, me poursuivrait toute ma vie. Elle serait toute ma vie et ne laisserait place à rien d’autre. ...

Mon histoire était ma prison... (172)

Her attempt to live as a powerless narrator “going with the flow” of the story in mere observation of its development has only made the necessity of narrative awareness more apparent. For Ben Jelloun, this is as much a question of literary philosophy as of character development, although the two concerns are nicely wedded in this example. Her identification with

the implied author progresses further with her later role as public writer in the prison (173).

The question of the narrator's voice receives literal treatment at the close of *La Nuit sacrée*. An unknown voice is suddenly cut short and it occurs to the narrator that the voice is hers:

C'était peut-être ma propre voix qu'on m'avait confisquée. On avait dû me prendre la voix et la laisser errer dans les nuages. Alors toute seule, elle se lisait. ... J'étais privée de voix, mais je l'entendais, loin de moi, venant d'ailleurs, traversant d'autres montagnes. Ma voix était libre. Moi, je restais prisonnière.
(183-4)

The ever-growing self-awareness of the narrator and her dependence on an outside force which dictates her existence are couched once again in terms which emphasize freedom. Here Zahra's awareness of the separateness of her voice from herself implies for her a sense of freedom, but it is a forlorn freedom—her physical incarceration overrides the progressive revelation of her fictional nature.

The moment that the telling of the story is seen to be effected by magical means we are faced with a transcendental metaphor for the creation of the work which is impossible for the reader to take at face value. We are forced, in other words, to consider the implications for the authorship of the work, rather than merely considering the nature of the vehicle by which Zahra transmits her story. The fact that this takes place ostensibly without her knowledge further implies an authorial presence. What is the author's role? Is his authorship also enabled by magical means? Does he know?

6.11 *Magic revelations*

Various manifestations of magical power seem to be a crucial element in revelations relating to the delineation of the plot or the interpretation of it. In *La Prière de l'absent* a flashback to Yamna's past tells of the pivotal

prediction by the Jewish fortune-teller Friha, where the symbols of the tree and the fountain recur. The critical detail is that Friha makes the prediction without the use of the cards, that is, without even the pretence of an outside source for her esoteric knowledge:

Sans avoir recours aux cartes, Friha se mit à parler : ...

« Ton avenir... ma fille, ce sera un arbre et une fontaine.
Mais je vois cet horizon au bout d'une route, vague, sombre,
barrée par des barricades de pierres et des troncs d'arbres abat-
tus. (65-6)

Zahra's magical power in *La Nuit sacrée* seems to reach a symbolic pinnacle in the chapter "L'enfer" ("Ton pouvoir est immense" (182)), where she appears as the "Sainte des sables" receiving pilgrims who engage in a ritual designed to ensure fertility. The women appear to be insatiable in their desire to extract the maximum amount of benefit from this ritual:

Les femmes étaient heureuses ; certaines retenaient ma main sur leur ventre et la glissaient vers leur vagin. Elles pensaient que les caresses ne suffiraient pas. Pour plus de sûreté elles obligeaient mes doigts à froisser leur peau, à la marquer jusqu'à la blessure. (181)

Unlike other departures from the objective narrative line in *La Nuit sacrée*, this episode is not framed in terms of a dream or an invented story. The only frame for this apparent deviation from the "truth" is the chapter itself, with the demarcation implied by the title "L'enfer". This episode implies an extreme modification in the consciousness of the narrator. Here what can be objectively interpreted as a metaphor (the procession of women arriving to procure Zahra's blessing for their children is at once resonant with her burgeoning power to affect her destiny and her inability to control that power) is nevertheless presented as an objective truth, an actual event. From the point of view of a narrator who is aware of herself as such, she has therefore entered a realm more closely approximating the *reader's* (or the

author's) reality than the preceding narrative, when she invented stories to tell her fellow prisoners. That is to say, she is capable of pretending and not signalling her pretence.

Zahra's apparently limited control over the participants in the ritual seems analogous to the battles we have seen between Zahra as narrator and her characters. Despite the reverence shown to her, she seems under the influence of a higher power, of "un maître omniprésent mais invisible" (181). The ersatz ritual of the anointing of the lips of the very young girls presented to her evokes another metaphor: the correspondence between the Zahra's reparative surgery and the Consul's desire to part the sewn-up lips of his mother to hear her speak (see Section 6.10, page 171). The power of the metaphorical nature of the ritual is made even more apparent when, in this case too, the ritual is perverted:

Je ne savais plus ce que je faisais. Le ventre nu qui se présentait à moi était poilu. Ma main descendit un peu et rencontra un membre en érection. Je la retirai et regardai le visage qui essayait de se dissimuler. D'une voix basse il me dit :

— Il y a longtemps que tu es parti. ... Remets ta main sur mon ventre. N'hésite pas à le déchirer avec tes ongles. S'il faut souffrir autant que ce soit par tes mains. (181-2)

The participants in the ritual all seem to seek power or knowledge through suffering, echoing Zahra's own experience of gaining the knowledge of her power after her experience of prison (see Section 6.9, page 171).

But this ritual is at once the portrait of Zahra's madness and a foreshadowing of *La Nuit sacrée's* final episode, where the roles are reversed. In this episode we see Zahra's final epiphany, where her concept of her existence becomes crystallized:

Tout devenait clair dans mon esprit. Je pensais qu'entre la vie et la mort il n'y avait qu'une très mince couche faite de brume ou de ténèbres, que le mensonge tissait ses fils entre la réalité et l'apparence, le temps n'étant qu'une illusion de nos

angoisses. (189)

It is almost as if Zahra realizes that fiction, in the guise of “mensonges”, is the fabric of her existence. It appears that magic again provides the means to self-awareness, since at the moment of this realization Zahra is “sous l’emprise de quelque magie” (189). The significance of her realization is emphasized by a further subversion of a ritual similar to the anointing of the girls’ lips; men and women queue to kiss the hand of the Saint (apparently in reality the blind Consul)—Zahra joins the men’s queue:

Quand je fus face au Saint, je m’agenouillai, je pris sa main tendue et, au lieu de la baiser, je la léchai, suçant chacun de ses doigts. Le Saint essaya de la retirer mais je la retenais de mes deux mains. (189)

Zahra’s self-conscious manipulation of the ceremony make her the author as well as the protagonist at the climax of the work. The influence of the magic and the symbolism of the ritual, ready to be altered at her conscious whim, enable a realization of and simultaneous fulfilment of the roles of the work.

Conclusion

The element of magic appears to form a kind of continuity in Ben Jelloun’s work in which fiction and religious belief are also part of the same series. All this takes place inside the conscious limits of the fictional work but in such a way that the reader is encouraged to feel uneasy about his relationship with the characters and the narrators. The element of magic is the transcendental concept which allows the idea that the work may have an effect on the reader beyond that which he wittingly allows. This creates the illusion that the characters and narrators, although obviously inhabiting a fictional world, are constantly on the verge of escaping it.

7. CODIFYING THE BODY

Ritual is interpreted by many observers as in some way encoding the body in its sensual manifestation. The participant in a ritual is supposed to implicate his or her body in a structure which is assumed most often to be verbal. While the purpose of this thesis is not to examine the merits of this claim (fiction may just as well take from fallacy as from fact), the perception of this role for ritual has profound implications for a literature which self-consciously makes use of rituals to affect meanings. Ben Jelloun's novels are an example of such a literature.

The incorporation of the body into a system of signs and symbols can be seen as analogous to the mystification which is examined in Chapter 5. What is broadly referred to as the creation of an "enigma" in that chapter may be examined in an analytical fashion as a type of encrypting (see especially page 121).¹ The present chapter, in contrast, is concerned with a kind of encoding, a transformation into verbal constructions which is nevertheless well understood by the participants and observers, and assumed to be decodeable by whoever understands the process. In one sense encoding is a prerequisite to encrypting.

This chapter shows how this process of encoding the body can be identified in the texts. We examine the different forms which this encoding takes, for example: substitution of the body with text, dissimulation of the body (hiding its true nature), implication of the writer figure in the work which he is himself writing, the suggestion that physical bodily ritual is a kind of fiction. We also examine the implications of this encoding for Ben Jelloun's

¹ The idea of enigma as the concept behind encryption is reflected in the naming of the Second World War Enigma code.

work.

7.1 *The Book incorporates the body*

As so often with Ben Jelloun's work, we find his ideas about writing are expressed within the work itself, or, to look at the matter another way, certain of his characters' apparent attitudes to writing structure the purpose of the work itself. Therefore, the writer of the journal in *L'Enfant de sable* unavoidably implies that the journal will be there when his physical body is no longer, and so it already constitutes a freeing of his identity from his physical body. By extension, the book which the reader has in his hands constitutes a freeing of the author Ben Jelloun, merely by the fact that the author is physically absent.

Ben Jelloun places the whole work *L'Enfant de sable* in this context by means of this introductory passage. We are not even told who this character is or what exactly is the story which he will record—this whole first chapter, entitled “Homme”, is left as an open question. Indeed, it would not be too far-fetched to think of it as a general statement, defining man as the writer (“Il y avait d'abord ce visage allongé ... dire ce qu'il avait cessé d'être” (7–12)), the storyteller (“Et qui fut-il? ... le livre du secret ne vous abandonne” (12–13)) and the audience (“Les hommes et les femmes se levèrent ... les premières lueurs du crépuscule” (13–14)). But what of the storyteller's freedom? He seems to have sacrificed the bodily freedom obtained by the writer:

Je suis ce livre. Je suis devenu le livre du secret ; j'ai payé de ma vie pour le lire. Arrivé au bout, après des mois d'insomnie, j'ai senti le livre s'incarner en moi, car tel est mon destin. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 13)

So the book would seem to represent a form of communication between bodies which functions by a process of removing itself from a body and

incorporating itself within another. This statement has certain implications for the work in terms of narrative viewpoint, since we are forced to examine the degree of freedom that the author appears to have.

Ben Jelloun focuses for this purpose on the communicative act which the book achieves, and thus makes the existence of the book as a physical entity problematic.

The identity of the physical book with its communicative function becomes a metaphor for the identity of the storyteller with his story. His memorization of the book's contents acts not upon his mind, as we might expect, but rather fills his body: "Vous ne pouvez y accéder [à ce livre] sans traverser mes nuits et mon corps" (12–13). This is where we have a sharp contrast between the "real-life" function of the storyteller and his function, as Ben Jelloun appears to see it, as a fictional character who narrates a story. In "real life" it is by means of the mind of the storyteller that the audience has access to the story, or at least by means of his voice, certainly not by means of his body. But how far are we to accept the word of the storyteller on this score? Are his exhortations meant to be taken seriously? Or is he merely demonstrating the storyteller's predilection for fabrication and duping the naïve?

It seems to me that this device—of the storyteller's or narrator's appeal to his audience or readership—serves mainly to define the level of narrative being pursued. In the initial passage of the first chapter we have an objective, omniscient narrative, speaking in the third person about a protagonist's thoughts, memories, surroundings and physical state. This narrative gives an impression of authorial viewpoint which is brusquely shattered with the second passage (12–13) where it is implied that the first passage is the narrative of the first storyteller. All but a few lines of this second passage consist of the storyteller's corporeal claim of the story's authenticity, and an invitation to the audience to listen to the remainder of the story. The third passage, like the first, seems objective, and coming as it does after the storyteller's invocation, implies the presence of another

narrator who has not yet declared himself.

The storyteller seems to be testing the credulity of the reader with his extravagant claims to ownership of the story. The existence of a framing narrative to his account—describing his audience and his departure from the square—suggests that such a claim is also made implicitly by the author of the work: Ben Jelloun himself.

But within the limits of the work (according to the way in which we choose to define them) Ben Jelloun ultimately has the power to make a story incorporate itself into a character's body—the storyteller's bravado echoes Ben Jelloun's in defining such a reality. It would not be extravagant to say that everywhere this theme is apparent in Ben Jelloun's novels there is a tendency to emphasize it with these metaphorical Russian dolls, in an imitation of the structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The book incorporates the writer's body by the implication of the experience of its characters, which have been similarly taken over by their stories.

7.2 Codes and keys

The theme of encoding the body turns up literally in *La Prière de l'absent*, where the symbols decorating one of the storytellers are subject to interpretation. Yamna's facial tattoos lend another dimension to the "reading" the Tarot card reader gives of her client's future:

Aussi le soir où son visage, avec ses tatouages—un poisson aveugle sur le menton, un triangle renversé sur le front, symboliquement, d'après ce qu'on raconte, la forme du pubis—, devait être éclairé et déchiffré par le regard de Friha, elle se sentit toute petite, emplie de honte et d'un profond silence. (*La Prière de l'absent*, 65)

Literally described by the narrator as "reading", this metaphor for the telling of Yamna's future is expanded to include what, for Ben Jelloun,

seem to be some of the most important characteristics of the process of reading a text: decoding, the interpretation of symbols, the effect of spoken stories on the text (“d’après ce qu’on raconte”). Not only can the body be interpreted as a text, then, but also it can literally be a text, a representation of things remote from itself. Interpretation is then not only possible, but required.

On a more fundamental level we see, in the novel *La Prière de l’absent*, the way bodily gestures and maladies affect emotional response. In this novel, which contains multiple references to bodily functions, often extending into the grotesque or fetishistic, the narrative seems to accentuate the various readings which can be attributed to a single bodily gesture. In the following passages the narrator focuses in a somewhat obsessive manner on the capacity of the simple act of eating to inspire contrasting feelings in different observers; on the one hand disgust, and even hatred, and at the other end of the scale, a kind of erotic fascination. While his wife is revolted by his lack of finesse, his pupil appears to be attracted for similar reasons:

Il faisait du bruit en mâchant très rapidement les aliments. Sa femme le détestait en partie à cause de sa manière de manger. Mais lui exagérait pour exaspérer sa haine. (18)

His discovery that an extra pupil of his conversely loves to watch his displays of boorishness, which he therefore turns into a self-styled “ritual”.

Il savait qu’elle aimait sa façon d’avaler les fruits. Alors il en faisait trop et poussait loin le rituel auquel il ne désespérait pas de donner un aspect érotique, l’aspect d’une séduction brutale. (19)

While the protagonist’s pupil actively extracts delight from the grotesque gestures of her teacher, in another part of the narrative, the eccentricities of the organism play a dominant role. The narrator (in the form

of “words from the night” (46)) attributes to the protagonist a persistent headache which he credits with changing his personality. In effect this illness creates a new personality, giving us an example of the physical body giving rise to what we may consider an intellectual realization.

Tu étais très émotif et ta seule folie, ta seule perturbation notable était ton mal de tête dont la violence changeait, ou du moins changeait tes réactions, ton humeur et ta prise sur le réel. Le mal de tête te rendait ta part de violence et toute l'énergie accumulée et non dépensée. La douleur était telle que tu devenais un autre homme, un homme souffrant mais vivant, recevant les décharges de la vie et du mouvement du temps. (45)

The fact that this function is counter to the assumption of the mind's dominance over the body is indicated by the unusual turn of phrase “Le mal de tête te rendait ta part de violence” which ascribes to this affliction an almost conscious involvement in this evolution of his personality.

In an extension of this symbolic relationship between the mind and the body, and reflecting the interpretation of the facial tattoos which we have looked at, the characters' stories in *La Prière de l'absent* are described as encoded in the lines of their faces. This encoding is presented as systematic and able to be read like a text. As we hear Yamna's story we are struck by the way in which the tragedy of her life is graphically illustrated by her physical state and that of her associates:

Son corps était devenu flasque et très fatigué, comme une terre usée, fêlée par la sécheresse ou ruinée par l'inondation.

...

Friha avait bon cœur, mais son maquillage excessif n'arrivait pas à dissimuler une barbe qu'elle rasait ni les quelques poils qui poussait sur son gros nez. Elle entretenait cette laideur dont elle accentuait l'aspect avec des bijoux en or très vulgaires. ... C'était un regard qui avait trempé dans un puits lointain, dans

une tombe profonde, dans une vie étrange, partagé entre l'enfer et les manigances de quelque diable. (62–4)

As this last sentence shows, the physical state of the character's body not only suggests the nature of her history, but even leads to fantastic metaphoric speculation on the path of her mind. Except that we are compelled to ask whether it is enough to read this as a metaphor—if we accept that the characters are conscious of their fictionality, then the best way to read this is as a fact. The narrator is making this look (“un regard”) and what it evokes in the imagination inextricably linked. The body and its story are the same. This is further emphasized by the observation of Friha's cartomancy technique:

En fait elle ne lisait rien dans les cartes. Elle trouvait tout sur le visage de ses clients. (64)

The extensive treatment of the theme of encoding in *La Prière de l'absent* serves as a signpost for the reader's interpretation of Ben Jelloun's texts. Techniques such as introducing an episode where signs on the body are deciphered in obvious reference to that character's significance in the text have an unsettling effect upon the reader, implicating his or her own concept of body into the reading of the work.

7.3 Replacing the body with text

Another manifestation of the encoding of the body in Ben Jelloun's works is the apparent link between the creation of a text and the negation of a body, and vice-versa. This can be interpreted as a replacing of the body with the text.

While the girl narrator Ahmed gives us cause to detect a symbiosis of the body and the text in *L'Enfant de sable*, the opening pages of the novel contain an account of a man's loss of control over his physical body and the expectation of, and preparation he makes for, his impending death. His decrepitude is his very motivation for writing.

Son dos s'était légèrement courbé, ses épaules étaient tombées en disgrâce ... Il traînait les pieds, ramassant son corps, luttant intérieurement contre la mécanique des tics qui ne lui laissaient aucun répit. (*L'Enfant de sable*, 10)

The man begins a memoir in which to put down the secrets of his life to be revealed after his death. The narrative quotes an "Egyptian poet" as the source of his inspiration for writing the account.

« ... Un journal est parfois nécessaire pour dire que l'on a cessé d'être. » Son dessein était exactement cela : dire ce qu'il avait cessé d'être. (11–12)

This simple statement provides us with a summary of Ben Jelloun's fundamental approach when dealing with a concept as paradoxical and potentially complex as the codifying of the body in his texts. For Ben Jelloun, all writing necessarily involves some kind of freeing of the author, both from his own personal circumstances and from the particular social and cultural surroundings in which he finds himself. Fictional writing especially is a medium (or milieu) in which the ideals of the imagination can have free rein.

This concept of the freeing of the body through writing is encompassed within a wider context in which writing in Ben Jelloun's work implies an absence and a denial. The novel *L'Écrivain public* contains many examples of this feature, some of which clearly demonstrate the role of the body in this process.

J'ai l'impression d'avoir effacé le visage de cette fille. J'entends encore sa voix et je devine ses pensées. J'ai retrouvé non pas des lettres mais un journal intime. Elle ne m'écrivait presque jamais, consignait ... des espaces blancs délimités par un crayon rouge, des dates barrées, des points d'interrogation... (*L'Écrivain public*, 74)

In this quotation we notice the preponderance of negatives as well as ideas which represent negation. The narrator is speaking of his first wife, and her bodily absence is represented not just by the existence of the journal she left behind, but by the characteristics of the journal itself, with its “espaces blancs” and “dates barrées”. Further, her journal delineates a replacement of writing by the body—in this case represented by (partial) sexual fulfillment.

Je me cache pour écrire, mais j'ai envie de crier. Je n'ai personne à qui remettre la lettre que les nuits, longues et froides, me dictent. ...

Pourquoi donc avoir inventé un homme pour occuper mes images et mes pensées. C'est étrange! Je l'ai taillé dans du granit. ...

J'aime me retrouver dans le silence qui précède le sommeil; je sens que j'ai le temps et toutes les libertés d'appartenir à la nuit et à l'homme que j'aurais élu dans les espaces blancs de ma solitude. ...

2 février : Le soir j'essaie de lui écrire. Impossible. Envie qu'il me caresse. Je m'endors la main entre les jambes. (74–6)

Her inability to write coincides with her discovery of carnal pleasure—in other words, her body has replaced her text. Indeed, the intermediate phase of sculpting a man for herself out of granite makes this transition even more apparent. This act of sculpting involves her body in a far more substantial way than writing does, but still retains the essential creative impulse of writing. As soon as her body is involved to the extent where it apparently dictates her will, however, the creative impulse disappears, and she is no longer able to write.

7.4 *Ritual as fiction*

In *La Nuit de l'erreur* Ben Jelloun demonstrates the crossover between the concepts of fiction and ritual with the example of the suicide victim's perversion of the burial rite. In this example we see a clear desire by the participant to involve his body in an elaborate intrigue by the use of a ritual. His actions are symbolic in the manner of a literary text rather than allegorical in the manner of a myth.

As Salim wanders around the town of Chaouen, he comes across a funeral procession for a man who has committed suicide, and who therefore has no right to a Muslim burial. Ignorant of this, he decides to accompany the coffin, and is informed that the dead man sacrilegiously had his body prepared for burial before his death, eventually being suffocated by the burial shroud (*La Nuit de l'erreur*, 261). The narrator is puzzled by the dead man's motivation in exerting such control over his bodily fate through the mechanism of this ritual, twisted to his own ends. Is this also perhaps an example of the incorporation of the body within a system of signs and signals in order to obtain freedom? According to the account of the man pulling the funeral cart, the dead man at least seems to have seen it as a liberation:

Pendant qu'ils psalmodiaient des prières sur son corps, lui riait.
Je n'ose pas vous dire, mon ami, ce qui le faisait rire. Je n'ose pas. Après tout, à présent qu'il est mort, on peut le dire : son sexe s'est levé comme un piquet. (261)

The dead man, carried along by the original audacity of his own perversion of the burial rite, seems to have found a refuge from the fear of death in the realm of his own fantasies. We are told that his doubt and hatred of religion has driven him mad, and we can infer that Ben Jelloun's intention in this episode is to provide a sardonic analysis of the apparent irony in the ritual. This stems from the overtly sensuous nature of a ritual which, however, customarily involves a dead body. The sensuality inherent in the

ritual immediately becomes apparent once the ritual is made to fall outside the bounds of this custom, and is subverted by a living man.

The man's laughter is a retort to the religion he rejects (and to the bodily control it exerts over him), as he perceives the absurdity of its rituals, and the possible prosaic interpretation of the concept of bodily "ascension" to heaven. The care this man has taken to create his own meaning for the ritual and to exert an author's control over his ultimate fate, combined with his awareness of the role of language in setting the imagination free from pre-established social constraints, provides a succinct, if somewhat irreverent, illustration of Ben Jelloun's exploration of the body-text relationship.

This example also demonstrates the inevitable implication of the interchange between ritual and fiction (this interchange being itself inevitable, since ritual fosters fantasy): that collective ritual opposes freedom, and individual ritual pursues it. From an ironic viewpoint, collective ritual provokes rebellion, leading to perversion of the ritual by means of the free imagination. (Fiction being a peculiar form of imagination or fantasy, however, this sacrilegious form is generally unique in character, not contagious as real-life heresy can be.) Therefore fiction which embraces freedom, as Ben Jelloun's does, gravitates towards anomalous forms of ritual, exploring their fantastic potential.

7.5 Ritual and fiction as liberation of the body

It is possible to see a correlation between the way the liberation of the body is sometimes supposed to be effected by the act of ritual on the one hand, and the process of fictionalization, as, for example, in the writing of a novel, on the other. This has to do with the state of mind of the writer and the participant in a ritual immediately before and at the moment of their respective acts.

The intensive preparation often involved in ritualistic ceremonies, and the concentration necessary to perform all the necessary steps in the pre-

scribed fashion (often corresponding to some myth or legend which must thereby be recreated in actions) has been observed to place the consciousness of the participants on a level somewhat removed from observers—their minds are often apparently drawn away to some fantasy realm which is partly, if not wholly, of their own making through the mechanism of the ritual itself. This state of mind is not unlike that experienced by a writer of imaginative fiction, who necessarily inhabits a world entirely of his own creation for hours at a time while he elaborates the detail of his work—many times, also, according to a preconceived plan. In both cases this state of mind, temporarily removed from immediate reality, has palpable consequences for the intensity of the content of the work or performance, and in the implication of bodily liberation.

In Ben Jelloun's depiction of the city of Fez (his birthplace) as the body proper, Bengt Novén sees the two imaginary flights over the city by the child narrator of *Harrouda* as liberations from the incarcerating body, linked to two rites of passage: the trips to the hammam and circumcision. Extremes of sensory experience, pleasure and pain, effect, writes Novén, a liberation from the body which is the organ of that experience. This brings us to another means of examining the apparent parallels between the characteristics of ritual and fiction in Ben Jelloun, which has to do with the state of mind of the writer or the participant in a ritual. E.M. Forster touches on it in reference to the preponderance of the theme of love in novels:

The constant sensitiveness of characters for each other ... is remarkable, and has no parallel in life, except among people who have plenty of leisure. Passion, intensity at moments—yes, but not this constant awareness, this endless readjusting, this ceaseless hunger. I believe that these are the reflections of the novelist's own state of mind while he composes, and that the predominance of love in novels is because of this. (Forster, 53-54)

Not only love but other characteristics also may be explained by the novel-

ist's state of mind, and also the way Ben Jelloun, for one, sees the characteristics of the writing process. It may not be the very extremes of sensory experience which effect the bodily liberation, but the ritual preparation for those experiences which sensitizes the mind to them and which parallels the state of hypersensitivity experienced by those engaged in an act of creative imagination. These two phenomena have in common the channelling, or concentration, of mental energies.

In *La Prière de l'absent* the protagonist's initial self-analysis relies heavily on the limited possibilities his body has allowed him:

Lui, aurait aimé être acrobate ou pianiste. Son corps le gênait, il ne savait comment le rendre plus souple, comment le plier et l'adapter à des situations nouvelles. Il se balançait à l'intérieur de sa peau, ce qui lui donnait un peu le vertige. (*La Prière de l'absent*, 14)

Interestingly, in the phrase "Son corps le gênait" we have another apparent example of the way in which Ben Jelloun ironically refers to the connection between body and text. The sense of unease the protagonist feels about his body parallels the sense of unease that a writer might feel about the degree of corporeality he imagines his characters to have. In short, the protagonist here happens to feel as he would if he knew he were a character in a book with those bodily characteristics ascribed to him by an author. We see more and more obvious features of the way the protagonist thinks about his body and the way the author must view him as a character:

Cet état d'absence et d'insistance que seul un corps vidé, un être réduit à sa seule forme, pouvait connaître, lui procurait une espèce de sérénité mêlée d'inquiétude. (5)

Ben Jelloun refuses to allow his characters to think of themselves in a way which ignores completely their fictional nature. This "sérénité mêlée d'inquiétude" is the unease provoked by the suggestion or half guessed-at

notion by the protagonist that he is fictional, that he is “un être réduit à sa seule forme”.

Il pensait à la substance comme d'autres pensent à la nourriture. Remplir cet être, lui donner un contenu, lui procurer une histoire et une euphorie, lui assurer la vertu. ... il pouvait encore réagir, sentir que sa présence au monde n'était pas une chimère ou un rêve d'une nuit d'hiver. ... Il recherchait la douleur et même la peur comme un animal traqué. Traqué par le vide d'un espace blanc et illimité. (16)

This endless white space is none other than the white of the page waiting for the author to write upon it. Who else seeks pain and fear but the writer who wishes to make them ingredients in his story? It may seem churlish to reduce this character's emotions to the level of an ironic allegory on writing, and indeed it would be; so we must realize that Ben Jelloun never allows such an interpretation to be cut and dried. He is always hanging back from the obvious parallels: his characters' thoughts merely seem odd and out of the blue. There is nothing about the protagonist of *La Prière de l'absent* that makes us think he should have the mind of a writer. Indeed, it is as if Ben Jelloun wishes to imply that his own act of writing inevitably allows such “clues” to sneak into the text.

Once again we hear echoes of the extraction of the text from the body:

Il était certes débarrassé d'un corps encombrant, mais il entendait encore des gémissements et ne savait plus quel sentiment il allait éprouver. (16)

This passage describes the process of writing, with the protagonist merely demonstrating the characteristics of the fictional creation.

Se rappeler à la vie, à la mort ! Il passait en revue les maladies les plus douloureuses et les moins fatales : une rage de dents par une chaude nuit d'été ; des calculs au reins ; un doigt coupé par

un couteau de cuisine ou un ongle arraché par une portière...
(17)

Having outlined the mental process of this essentially hypothetical character, this character representing the fictional character *per se*, Ben Jelloun makes further parallels as he attempts to define a function for the concept of the fictional body.

Son corps avait abdiqué pour une disponibilité encore toute petite. ... Toute sa vie son organisme avait pâti d'une bonne santé. Pas la moindre égratignure. Un corps sain, blanc, gras, las. Il pouvait se rebeller maintenant, souffrir, exister en dehors de toute sécurité. (17)

The body described here seems to invoke the idea of a fictional body before the author has ascribed any distinguishing characteristics to it. By a conscious act of recognizing his bodily mortality ("Se rappeler à la vie, à la mort"), the protagonist ascribes for himself such characteristics and becomes his own author:

Grâce à la douleur qui commençait son cheminement, il accordait à la conscience. Une conscience violente, exigeante, passionnée.

Son imagination avait acquis une force et une capacité créatrices insoupçonnées. Grâce à cette libération il pouvait enfin jongler avec ses souvenirs et tabous, les déformer, les échanger et même les réinventer. Il se sentait aussi le pouvoir de rire de lui-même et de tout démolir d'un seul geste. (18)

In Ben Jelloun's novels there is a constant ironic interchange of the ideas that the text originates in the body of the writer and that the characters' bodies originate in the text. Here we see how these ideas impact on the rebellion of the characters against their condition, and the parallels with theories about ritual.

7.6 Dissimulation through the body

One of the techniques Ben Jelloun uses to implicate the body in a fictional structure is the involvement of the body in a pretence. This is most striking when the pretence implies a change of gender, as this obviously deals with one's very identification with the body. Although the problematic identity of bodies is a feature of a great deal of Ben Jelloun's novels, *L'Enfant de sable* provides us with an ideal starting-point in examining this technique, dealing as it does with the theme of androgyny.² In a comparison with Katibi's novel *Love in Two Languages (Amour Bilingue)*, Winifred Woodhull posits this androgyny of Ben Jelloun's as being "essential" in nature and an expression of the experience of being truly both sexes at once, an assertion which is borne out in our present analysis.

In *Love in Two Languages* bisexuality, or androgyny, truly involves different experiences of being *between* two sexes, rather than of being *both* male and female, as is the case with Ahmed/Zahra, the Moroccan girl who is raised as a boy in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* ... and its sequel *The Sacred Night* ... In the latter novel, the essentialism in Ben Jelloun's treatment of androgyny is particularly apparent ... Zahra discovers her true being—her true body, her true femininity—in her lovemaking with the blind consul who, she says, "sculpted me into a statue of flesh, desired and desiring. I was no longer a creature of sand and dust of uncertain identity ..." (Woodhull, 202-3)

In Woodhull's analysis we are able to glean a necessary distinction between the individualizing process in men and women as far as it is reflected in Ben Jelloun's work. Zahra "discovers her true being" according to Woodhull through the medium of her body and its involvement in the act of

² Cf. "Androgyny and the Concept of Identity in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable*," (Zanzana, 1997).

physical love. Ben Jelloun's female characters are bound to come to terms with their body as an integral part of their being in a way which is not the case for his male characters, who, for their part, are equally preoccupied with the *female* body.

Zahra's experience with the Consul underlines the technical nature of the female body which she must come to terms with despite the attempt by her father to suppress the existence of her femaleness. The manner in which she achieves this is echoed in the contrast between two characters made in Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*. In this work, Agnes is painfully aware of the awkwardness of her body, while her sister Laura avoids this trap simply by regarding her body as inherently sexual:

Once, when the sisters went shopping at a lingerie shop, Agnes saw Laura gently stroking a brassière that the saleswoman was showing her. That was one of those moments when Agnes realized the difference between her sister and herself: for Agnes, the brassière belonged in the category of objects designed to correct some bodily defect, such as a bandage ... In other words: a brassière reveals the *technical* nature of the female body. ... What was capable of changing Agnes' relation to the body? Only a moment of excitement. ... Why only a moment? For Laura the body was sexual from the beginning, *a priori*, constantly and completely, by its very essence. To love someone meant for her: to bring him one's body, to give him one's body, just as it was, with everything, inside and out, even with its own time, which is slowly, sweetly, corroding it. (Kundera, 108-9)

In *La Nuit sacrée* Zahra makes this transition from the diffidence such as that displayed by Agnes—and which is forced upon her by her father's ruse (together with bandages to hide her breasts, in a curious parallel with Kundera's passage), but which only exaggerates her awareness of the "technical" nature of her female body—to the celebration of her physical femaleness in the act of love, represented here by Laura, a celebration in which the

technical nature of the female body finds, at the least, an obvious purpose. As it is expressed in Kundera's work, this comparison sets off the character of Laura as self-resolving in the sense that it is self-annihilating. Her joyous embrace of the temporary nature of her body affords her an eternal state of self-creation and self destruction.

In the novel *L'Enfant de sable* the progression is more symbolic and goes through more stages. At the heart of *L'Enfant de sable* is the narrator's initially forced, but later willing, deconstruction of herself as a girl and reconstruction of herself as a man, and finally her rediscovery of her "nature" as a woman. We see how this takes place self-consciously on the level of the writing of the text and in such a way that we equate the power one has to control one's body (and one's fate) with the very power one has to define it, in a textual sense. We see this especially in Ahmed's difficulty in redefining herself as an independent being after her father's death:

L'empreinte de mon père est encore sur mon corps. Il est peut-être mort mais je sais qu'il reviendra. Un soir, il descendra de la colline et il ouvrira les portes de la ville une à une. Cette empreinte est mon sang, le chemin que je dois suivre sans m'égarer.
(*L'Enfant de sable*, 66)

The "empreinte" of her father is analogous to the impression of the printed word. It is the impression of the story he has made for her, which is now her fate which she equates with her blood. The flow of her blood is the flow of the story, in a metaphor which runs in both directions. Her father is both literally the provider of her physical blood and the creator of her (metaphysical) story. By implication, the struggle to take control of the story for herself is the struggle for her own body, which is partly expressed through various manifestations of the androgyny theme, where her assumption of the persona of a woman takes on overtones of transvestism.

Following a disastrous sequence of events, one version of the narrative has Zahra playing the part of the bearded lady in the captivity of the leaders

of a circus troupe. Here she has lost control of her story (an untrustworthy storyteller has usurped the narrative) as well as her body, which is both violated by the brute Abbas (142) and ritually cleansed by his mother, acting as his accomplice. Her barbs of criticism as she performs this duty underscore the pair's absolute possession of her body:

Je ne vois pas ce que mon imbécile de fils te trouve. T'as pas de poitrine, tu es maigre, tes fesses sont menues et creuses, même un garçon est plus bandant que toi. D'ailleurs, quand je passe ma main sur ta peau, je ne sens rien. C'est du bois. (143)

Through this litany Zahra's body is reduced to an inanimate construct. The androgyny represented by her function as the bearded lady in the circus is further compounded by the mother's comparison of her to a boy—and an inadequate one at that. Her loss of control over it has deprived it of the characteristics of a body—she becomes “wooden”, as her character has in this episode.

The character Jamal in *La Prière de l'absent* presents androgynous aspects which impinge on the perception of the body also. The student Sindibad forms a close, pseudo-sexual relationship with Jamal, another student, whom he regards as the female element in an otherwise male-dominated university. Sindibad himself demonstrates the ambiguity of the writer's fictional versus “real” existence in this episode. He takes on the task of demonstrating the physical characteristics of the hypothetical writer, both in his antics and his bodily appearance.

Tant qu'il écrivait, il se sentait en sécurité. Il rédigeait des pages entières de façon mécanique, sans jamais se relire, utilisant une plume en roseau qu'il trempait dans de l'encre marron pâle, l'encre des hommes de religion, des charlatans et des sorciers. ... Il avait un grand bloc de feuilles blanches dont il ne se séparait jamais. (*La Prière de l'absent*, 79)

Jamal's imaginative production in the form of poetry is part of his characterization as "l'élément féminin dans cette université" whose female students "venaient toutes enveloppées dans leur haïk, comme des momies qui auraient effacé leur corps" (84). So the expression of the "female element" represents an act of creation and demands the recognition of the body. It is the will to create in the face of opposition which separates Jamal from his other students to the point of usurping the female element of the women. This seems to set up a hierarchy of will over the physical body which is notable in other instances of androgyny themes in Ben Jelloun's work.

Sindibad's attachment to his books and the security writing gives him is an ironic self-commentary by an author who is aware of this physical delusory power of writing. The effects of submitting to this power are illustrated in symbolic fashion through this description of Sindibad:

Il avait sur la joue gauche une cicatrice. C'était la marque laissée par un bouton d'Orient mal enlevé. ... Il oubliait de se raser. Sa barbe accentuait cet aspect d'homme ténébreux, absent, dévoré par une profonde solitude. Il ressemblait à ces personnages de contes, insaisissables, mystérieux, presque fous. (80)

The symbiotic relationship Sindibad has developed with his work has turned him into a caricature of a fictional character. But it may be that Ben Jelloun's main point here is that the reader recognizes and deals with a character who is a caricature of a character. This apparent loop provides a paradox which should confuse, but the reader takes it in his stride, even if he is aware of the paradox.

Sindibad's (a.k.a. Ahmad) relationship with Jamal also shows characteristic emphasis on transition from ideal (idealistic) or ideas-based text to physical manifestation. In this example a first embrace between the two comes as a culmination of what we might term a "meeting of minds" involving the exchange of books and the discussion of radical ideas on which the pair turn out to agree.

... après avoir lu un long poème de Jamal, Ahmad, ému, ne dit rien, mais s'approcha de son ami et l'embrassa longuement en pleurant.

Leur amitié était donc scellée par ce long baiser silencieux. Jamal avait la peau très brune et les yeux presque verts. ... (83)

The sequence of ideas in this passage, with its transition from speech to ideas to writing and finally silence, to the physical gesture of the kiss, then the physical description of Jamal which continues, indicates a sub-text which is attempting to define categorically the stages of a journey where the act of communication gives way to the state of physical existence. We may even infer that a physical reality is held to be inexorably caused by any communicative or imaginative act.

Interestingly with regard to the theme of the textual body, though not especially originally, the relationship ends with both friends becoming physically ill—Jamal is taken away, Ahmad comes down with typhoid—which occasions a dramatic increase in his imaginative powers:

Ahmad avait perdu la mémoire. Il avait réussi à tout oublier, les livres et les êtres. Ce fut à ce moment-là qu'il s'inventa une mémoire et racontait à qui voulait bien l'écouter ses fabuleux voyages à travers les mers. (88)

Androgyny is represented as a subterfuge which, although providing a point of tension, brings about negative consequences for the identity of the character. The identification of the body as a textual construct does not make it invulnerable—a product of the imagination alone—but instead implies that it is physically subject to the vicissitudes of the imagination.

7.7 *A Body as product of imagination*

In the novel *La Prière de l'absent*, the idea of a story generating a body finds fullest expression, when the child protagonist, around whom the story

revolves, appears himself to be born as a product of the story of the death of the first chapter's protagonist. This first protagonist seems to turn up in the following chapter in the form of the foundling, if we are to take Yamna's hints concerning the baby's origins seriously:

— Cet enfant est né de la source à ma main droite et de l'olivier à ma gauche. Il sort à peine d'une vie juste passable. (*La Prière de l'absent*, 54)

This brief definition of the child's former life fits in with the description which the protagonist of the first chapter gives: "Rien de marquant ne s'était donc passé dans sa vie" (20). In contrast to the implication of the body's dominance over the mind present in that chapter, however, the child's very birth (or rebirth) seems bound up in fantasy and imagination. It is as though the protagonist, by his meditations on his life alone, has succeeded in altering his reality to allow his imagination or the "voices of the night" to become the arbiter of his fate. Also, the fate of the book's other characters is carried along with him: "Aucun de nous n'a le choix. Notre destin est entre les mains de cet enfant ..." (54).

Yamna attempts to place the existence of herself and her fellow characters on more and more shaky ground vis-à-vis this child in terms that first approach, then include, the idea of the characters being conscious of being in a book:

— Nous ne sommes que l'ombre d'une image, dit Yamna. Nous ne sommes que le geste laissé dans l'espace d'une silhouette ou d'une apparition. ... Nous avons été désignés par la source, par la sage-femme, Lalla Malika, pour écrire ce livre, pour remplir toutes ces pages.

Sindidad intervient violemment :

— Mais tu te moques de nous ! Tu sais bien que ni Bobby ni moi ne savons lire et écrire. (56)

This “book” turns out to be a reference to the baby, who is a collection of “pages blanches” (57) which it is the characters’ duty to fill. Sindibad’s retort is a further emphasis of the power books appear to have, especially in a population which is mostly illiterate. Sindibad’s sense of being carried along by somebody’s imagination, to which has been imparted the magical power of writing, shows his fear of being controlled physically by ideas.

In a dream Yamna cautions Lalla Malika regarding the child:

— Ne lui parle pas trop ! Laisse-le s’habituer à son corps et à sa nouvelle vie. Mais fais attention, il faut garder le secret ! (77)

We have seen how important the concept of the secret is to Ben Jelloun in previous chapters, and here we find it juxtaposed with the event of a person’s mind apparently seamlessly having access to a new body. In Yamna’s statement there is almost the implication that this process depends upon the maintenance of this secret. This implies that the physical body is somehow brought about by an initial deliberate omission in information to the self which that body represents, but that the body is capable of maintaining that “self” independently once it is “used to” the body (note the etymology of *s’habituer*).

7.8 *Physical bodies, physical writing*

Ben Jelloun’s novels repeatedly invoke the relationship between words and the physical bodies which somehow produce them. The problematic nature of this issue is raised in *La Prière de l’absent*, during the episode in which Sindibad and Bobby attempt to proselytize to the crowd on the packed coach which they board at Meknès. The message which they attempt to convey to the crowd, dire warnings on the state of contemporary morality, struggles to be heard as their voices are drowned out in the chaos:

— Frères, nous vivons une époque où le rire vient après la blessure ! ...

— Il n'y a pas que les mains qui corrompent et avilissent. . .
(101)

The two storytellers are soon interrupted and forcibly ejected from the bus. The episode is basically a parable on the struggle of discourse against force. The jaded (non-)reaction of the bus passengers is an illustration of the way cynicism can become the enemy of communication, of the imparting of wisdom. The sheer volume of discourse itself undermines its power, at which point action takes hold of the trump card, to silence it. The world painted by Ben Jelloun is a world where the intellectual activity of storytelling is inextricably bound up with the physical problems of living and the struggle for power.

In contrast, the novel *La Nuit de l'erreur* seems to show words gaining more of the upper hand. In this novel words seem more often to have power over physical reality, rather than vice-versa. If we compare the characteristics of both sides of this interchange, we notice a disintegration of the barriers separating discourse and reality, in a way which seems designed to emphasize the equivocal nature of the author's attitude to this very distinction. The narrator of *La Nuit de l'erreur* approaches Ben Jelloun's often-repeated metaphor "writing so as to have no face" (*Cicatrices du soleil*, in *Les Amandiers sont morts de leurs blessures*, 191)³ by means of an invocation of the "exorcizing" power of writing:

Quelqu'un lui avait dit que le meilleur moyen de quitter une femme, c'était d'écrire son histoire. L'écriture devait avoir un pouvoir d'exorcisme. Mettre la vie dans les mots, même en trichant, était une façon d'agir sur elle. . . .

« . . . Je sais, il y en a qui écrivent de peur de devenir fous, d'autres, parce qu'ils ne savent rien faire d'autre, ou pour ne plus avoir de visage . . . » (*La Nuit de l'erreur*, 259–60)

³ See also in *La Rue pour un seul*: "Voilà pourquoi j'écris pour ne plus avoir de visage." 35, and also 39.

Although the man whose words the narrator recalls here seems perfectly satisfied with the efficacy of this method of acting directly upon life through the seemingly paradoxical method of inventing fiction, the narrator himself seems to come to the conclusion that this reasoning is not suitable for his situation. A debate is thereby set up between the two factions of writing and action. Salim, a protagonist in *La Nuit de l'erreur*, takes the rational side against the apparently pervasive belief that myths, legends and other forms of storytelling have a “supernatural” effect on the physical world, and in particular on the progression of people’s lives. In doing so he becomes a warrior in the battle against uncanny forces and his own intelligence, which cannot help but form conclusions from the myriad of coincidences and symbolisms which plague him through the novel. He illustrates his defiance by retorting with a quote which is almost clichéd in its proverbial arrogance:

Il réfléchit un moment, puis acheta une carte postale à la réception de l’hôtel et écrivit cette pensée d’Alfred de Vigny :
« L’espérance est la plus grande de nos folies et la source de toutes nos lâchetés. » (260)

However, we have the impression that the narrator’s attitude to the optimism of his friend may only reflect his lack of success in finding any way to establish control over his worldly fate. His compulsive journey, after the anecdotal sensual pleasure offered by the heroine Zina, may lead him to a futile attempt to oppose the control words seem to have over bodies, ironically also by resorting to words.

Sindibad, the writer character of *La Prière de l’absent*, experiences the corporeal power of words in a more dramatic fashion. He seems to be physically taken over by a narrative he is compelled to relate. He brushes away “des mains et des sons venus du néant” (54). As we saw on page 168, his companions’ enquiries reveal that these agitations provoke in him thoughts of mortality. He declares: “Nous survivions grâce à cette fraude dont parle

le philosophe (*La Prière de l'absent*, 103). From these pessimistic thoughts on the false hopes we live by, on the trick played on us by life, Sindibad's audience paradoxically infers that he himself is insincere—symbolically stated: like a book.

— Mais Sindibad, tu parles comme un livre !

— Yamna, je suis un livre. J'ai été lu une seule et unique fois et ce fut la seule et unique qui m'importât. Je suis le manuscrit perdu, égaré entre la nuit et l'aube. Un livre mal fermé. De temps en temps des pages sont emportées par le vent et tombent sous les yeux des lecteurs eux-mêmes égarés. Parfois elles arrivent jusqu'à moi, là, sous mes yeux. Je ne fais que les lire sans savoir pourquoi je m'absente et pourquoi je suis pris par leurs phrases. Je suis certain d'une chose à présent : si je suis un livre, je suis un livre inachevé ! (104)

Sindibad, after transforming himself into a fictional character, becomes in his own mind the vessel of the fiction itself. No one contradicts him, it is simply one of the "énigmes" which must be "résolues". It is interesting to note the somewhat methodical way in which he explains this realization. The book is not the banal vehicle for a story, it has the characteristics of a player in the story. Like an enigmatic character, it is known well by just one other. It is lost, like a picaresque hero, and gives only an enticing drip-feed of clues about itself in the form of loose pages.

As the writer character and the story he tells reflect and involve one another, both the writer and the story are transformed to more closely resemble the other. We are struck therefore by a character who seems only tenuously attached to the physical world, and by his story whose effects are perceptible as a physical force.

Ben Jelloun in effect provides a form of solution to the paradox by which the physical produces the virtual, by showing how the process may take place in both directions simultaneously, in effect proving the enigmatic nature of the problem.

Ben Jelloun's more sacrilegious fictional experiments are placed in an interesting light by the commentary of Bengt Novén. He concludes, on the subject of the author's avowed intention (which we mentioned on page 202), to write "so as to have no face", that it is in the realm of ethics that the writer, in his chosen role, escapes from the need for a physical manifestation.

Dans l'éthique, l'écrivain n'a en effet « plus de visage » ; l'aspect témoignage lave l'écriture de la honte qui l'entache. L'éthique est la spatialité où la question qui suis-je n'a pas lieu d'être. (Novén, 200)

Ben Jelloun's use of this expression follows broadly the sense that Michel Foucault has apparently given it, although it is interpreted in rather more extreme fashion by Richard Rorty here:

Foucault, on the other hand, often seems to be doing his best to have no social hope and no human feelings. One cannot imagine Derrida writing 'so as to have no face', any more than one can imagine Nietzsche doing so. (Rorty, 13)

Ben Jelloun is merely applying Foucault's principle to the role of the author, where it is no less a powerful tool for real-life transformation for the fact of it being applied to the fictional realm. The status of the author's work as "testimony" is difficult to separate from the status of the real-life author as "witness", and the writer's motivation and role as a witness make him immune from prosecution, so to speak. Of course, this runs contrary to what we have understood to be implicit in Ben Jelloun's attempt to involve himself as author in the story of *L'Enfant de sable*. The close of that novel, as we have seen, implies the inevitability of the author's being judged on his work as if he were a character in it and on the same terms on which the actual characters are judged. But we are in no way obliged to believe in the rectitude of this judgment. For Novén this implication belongs to

a second phase of Ben Jelloun's writing, where the function of testimony becomes a constraining influence on the writer, who then calls this function into question.

La deuxième période de l'œuvre de Tahar Ben Jelloun correspond ainsi à des romans méta-narratifs sophistiqués (*L'Écrivain public*, *L'Enfant de sable*, et *La Nuit sacrée*) où le problème des manques peut se lire à la lumière du concept de la textualité. Ces récits s'organisent autour du corps travesti ; le corps désigne l'intériorité créatrice de l'écrivain. (201)

Regarded in this fashion, the theme of the fictionalization of the human body becomes a kind of metaphor for the author's process of fictionalizing the content of his imagination into the form of a novel.

This analysis provides us with the characteristics of Ben Jelloun's writing as far as the body and the subject of fictionalization are concerned, but his motivations for finding a link between these two still remain obscure: in Novén's schema, this is more or less a logical progression from the original dichotomy of hiding and revealing what the writer is ashamed of, but which nevertheless motivates him to write. But why especially see the body as a metaphor for the fictionalizing act? One can imagine a slightly heretical creationist perspective which implies any creative activity to be broadly analogous to the creation of Man in the Biblical sense, but there is no suggestion in Ben Jelloun's work that he is making such an allusion. Novén refers to Maurice Blanchot's suggestion that:

... l'expérience de l'écriture est celle d'un espace littéraire. Il s'agit de l'expérience d'une spatialité paradoxale qui fait de l'écriture un procès. (13–14)

It is this "transformation" which is always evident in Ben Jelloun's writing about the body. The existence of this transforming process which comes about as a result of the act of writing is the basis for his exploration of the similar characteristics of ritual.

Conclusion

Ben Jelloun involves the bodies of his characters in his writing in a way which consciously implicates himself in the act of writing. He emphasizes the multiple levels of narration which break up the text in such a way as to stress the transcendental nature of the bodily relations between the author, narrator, character and reader—that is, power relations are defined by the effect of narrative hierarchies upon bodies. The author works the body into his fictional scheme in a way that ostensibly demands interpretation of the body as a text, but in so doing he merely deepens the mystery of the text itself. At the same time, the ambiguity which stems from attempts to connect meanings with bodily forms is exploited, and definitive interpretations lampooned through heresy.

The sense of unease which Ben Jelloun's characters display in relation to their own bodies, literally, of not being “*bien dans leur corps*”, is a natural consequence of the half-guessed realization that their bodies are really text. Their conception of their bodies follows this realization, so that they imagine more and more what the reader experiences in reading them. This uncanny self-realization cannot fail but stimulate the same type of unease in the reader, whose reading is thereby implicated in the characters' self-exploration through the text. When one of the characters' feelings of ambiguity extend even to feeling that he is in fact a book, the reader's body is unavoidably implicated by the very act of reading, by physical contact with the book.

Ultimately, Tahar Ben Jelloun consciously encodes himself in his works and, in doing so, he transforms his sensual relationship to the world and others into words. This is reflected in the experience of his characters, which we have analysed here. His self-consciousness as a writer leads his characters into the ambiguity of identity—the essential schizophrenia—which a novelist experiences in his work, which, as we have seen, is often expressed through androgyny and transvestism.

8. CONCLUSION

The evocation of rituals in the novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun is firmly integrated into the author's fictional strategies, reflecting and strengthening his position with regard to the related areas covered in this thesis. These strategies, although varied and chaotic, work self-consciously to emphasize the role of subversion and manipulation in the generative process, and specifically in the creation of fiction itself.

A fundamental response to ritual is the inference of the need for interpretation or decoding—a response which is reflected in our reading of fiction. I have examined this response in the context of Ben Jelloun's consistent challenges to the basis of deriving meanings from fiction. These challenges, while undermining an easy path of interpretation in both fiction and ritual, nevertheless demonstrate the principle that both of these realms appear to establish a tension which is generative in nature. This tension arises from the essential enigmatic quality of the two forms—an existential mystery which demands a cognizant response in the observer or reader. In Ben Jelloun's work, while this enigmatic quality is assumed to accompany the forms themselves, the theme of enigma itself assumes major importance also, underlining and insisting on the essential, unknowable mystery which is held to generate any discourse.

Ritual differs from other types of discourse in the involvement of the body, going further even than dramatic performance, as it usually demands equal participation from almost all observers of the ritual. Ben Jelloun's fiction attempts to assimilate the idea of the body into the text, and even to implicate the bodies of the reader and the author into the work. To this end, rituals are employed in their transcendental function of implicating

the individual body into a collective myth, reflecting this idea in a way which creates the imaginative possibility of the body's incorporation into the fictional text.

Ritual occupies a special place in Ben Jelloun's fictional scheme, since it can easily be made to represent at once the product and the act of imaginative generation. In this straddling of the boundaries of life and imagination, which ritual achieves even without recourse to a fictive illusion, Ben Jelloun finds reflected the primitive anxiety in the face of the power of fiction, which is a hallmark of much of his work. Tahar Ben Jelloun, as a writer, finds it impossible to deny the transcendental nature of the creative process, whereby the mere fact of the work existing in the world separate from its creator is by itself an insoluble dilemma, which cannot help but find its way into the work. This dilemma is reflected in the transcendental power of the ritual, and its incorporation into the fictional dilemma is both the proof of the latter and a further cipher derived from it.

The use of modified rituals, or rituals whose original assumed purpose has been subverted in some way, by Ben Jelloun's protagonists, is clearly seen to be motivated by a desire for originality, and testifies to the author's preoccupation with freedom of expression as it is relevant to the fictional space. As a consequence of the self-consciousness of Ben Jelloun's fiction, his protagonists reflect the desire for free expression which is a precursor to the act of generating the work in the first place. The underlying idea of freedom upon which freedom of expression depends is explored in the works to the very boundaries of legitimacy and beyond. As self-conscious fictional entities their actions must themselves often be outrageous in order to demonstrate their freedom of expression. This freedom of expression is integrated into the characterization of the protagonists, and together with its motivating desire for originality becomes a necessary ingredient of the individual authenticity for which they strive, and which itself reflects their self-consciousness as fictional entities. The paradox implied by the striving to be authentic in the face of the awareness of one's fictionality feeds into

the pervasive enigmatic tone of the works.

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